

Growing Up as a Youth in Igbo Catholic Family and Community: Hopes and Challenges

Hello everyone. I want to thank the president of ICCUSA, Dr, Clement Anyadike, I also thank Lolo Ngozi Ajawara, who is the ICCUSA youth coordinator. On the same note, I want to thank Rev.Fr. Romanus Muoneke, the Chaplain of ICCUSA and other members of the clergy. Special thanks also go to Dr. Paul Amechie and Rev. Sr. Tony Ikebodu and everybody who helped organize this event.. Last but not least, I want to thank everybody that has made out time to be present here today. Peace be with you all.

My name is Chinyere Ohaya. I am 16 years old. As a Nigerian, I am from Umuduruoha, Amaigbo in Nwangele LGA in Imo State. As an American, I am from Atlanta, Georgia. I am very happy that a lot of us kids came to this event. We are watching you adults and seeing everything you're doing. There is an Igbo proverb that says: When a mother goat is eating weeds, the baby goat is watching her mouth.

Today I will be talking about growing up as an Igbo Catholic youth. Growing up, I have noticed that Igbo Catholic children are raised differently from others around them. A lot of attention is paid to going to church on Sundays and observing the Holy Days. We are raised to learn and live our faith as Catholics and my parents are the key to all of that. I remember when my siblings and I used to argue and talk a lot on our way to Church on Sundays. In order to stop this, my dad making us read the bible until we got to church and every Sunday after church, my parents will question us on what the readings and the homily were about to see how much attention we paid in church. It always makes me happy when they spend time to do that with us and it helped us to listen more during mass every Sunday. In our house, if you do something bad, my parents will deal with you the "Nigerian way". They will ask you if you want to call the police so that they can help you do so. There is a quote I heard once that has stuck with me: " you spare the rod, you spoil the child." This

quote comes from the bible verse Proverbs 13: 24. Everything our parents tell us or do to us now is not to punish us, but to help us so that we may be successful in life. Another important thing is education. A lot of attention is paid to this. Doing well in school is not an option. For example, if you get a 98% they might ask you “Why not a 100?” or if you were to make a B, they will ask you “The people who got A’s, do they have two heads?” They don’t do this to make us feel bad, even though we may feel that they put a lot of pressure on us. They do this because they have high expectations for us and they want us to be the best we can be. The last thing our parents want is to see us suffer, so they push us to get ahead in school so that we may grow up to have good, stable jobs and a wonderful life. My parents always say, ”Instead of giving a kid fish, give him what he needs to catch the fish; teach him how to catch the fish so he has the ability to stand on his feet.” They believe the best they can do for us is help us get good education, grow in our faith and maintain our strong catholic values. With these values we will go far in life even long after they are gone.

The best way to ensure that the Igbo Catholic youths do not drift away from their catholic faith is to catch them early. Parents are the key. However, I have noticed that some parents don’t take their children to church or may stop taking them to church once the children decide they don’t want to go anymore. I think it is important that even when they don’t want to go to church, the parents insist that they do so. I myself have had days when I just wanted to stay in bed instead of going to church, but I know that my parents would never allow that. I force myself out of bed every Sunday in order to go to church and praise God with my family. I remember when we moved to a new subdivision, our friends would come over to hang out with us any time of the day even on Sundays. They did not know what it meant to go to church on Sundays. Their parents did not care either. Well my mom and dad decided to ask us to invite them to go to church with us, and they were

glad to do so. As my parents put it, “we have to change them before they change us.” Imagine a family of nine (my grandma included) adding two girls from the neighborhood. Our SUV became a “mini school bus.” When we got to church, people wondered how we managed to have such a large family.

The cultural values of the Ibos differentiate us from those of other cultures. As my parents will say “the way you carry yourself says a lot about you and the family you come from”. Starting from our appearance, the way we dress should reflect our catholic upbringing. Boys, it may look cool to sag your pants, but it does not show that you come from a Catholic home. What you think is okay to wear when going out with your parents may not actually be so and may not be appropriate even for a casual outing with friends. I still do disagree with them sometimes, and I even used to think they were trying to make me look like an old woman, but I try to see it from their point of view. They say all these things for a reason so that in the end I may reap the benefits. They don’t want us to be recognized for our bodies. They want us to be recognized for our worth. Just know our parents are older and wiser and they have our interests at heart. That goes for everybody, both guys and girls. No one will hire you if you come in looking like you just came off the street. People want successful looking individuals who can show they know how to carry themselves with dignity and poise working for them, and not someone who looks like they just came out of jail. Sometimes we may feel that we don’t get the same amount of freedom as other kids. I know most of you will agree with me that we don’t have permissive parents. For example, asking to go to sleepovers or dating will fetch you that “nasty look”. If you say a member of the opposite sex is your friend, you have to really explain. In our culture, our parents keep us away from those things for certain reasons and dating is just seen as nothing but a distraction. Our parents will never lead us astray. And it is not

only our parents that are after our best interests, but also friends and families in our Igbo Community, which is why the Ibos believe in the saying “It takes a village to raise a child.”

There are many reasons why I am proud to be a part of the Igbo Catholic community. I sing in the NICCA youth choir and do the reading during mass, all in Igbo language. I remember the first time my parents told me that I would be doing the reading. I admit I didn't see the point in doing it and I hated public speaking. I even wondered why I should worry about speaking Igbo in America. However, as I started doing it more and more, I started getting better at it and I soon went from just doing readings in Igbo to giving speeches at different Igbo events. Having Grandma around helped me a lot. My grandma doesn't understand or speak any English, so for my siblings and I to communicate with her, we had to learn how to speak Igbo. Over time, we went from just pointing things out and mixing Igbo and English words together, to speaking Igbo fluently. My parents often joke around and say that they need to learn a third language because now they can't say anything around us without us understanding what they're saying. I think that it is important that we kids learn to speak Igbo in our households because it is another way of being more connected to our culture. I have friends from other cultures, like Mexican or Asian, and one thing I have noticed about them is how connected to their culture they are. Hispanics believe that it is very important for future generations of U.S. Hispanics to continue speaking Spanish because Latinos value both the ability to speak English *and* Spanish in their households, and do not prefer one over the other. They don't stop speaking their language just because they moved to America; they know that their culture is what makes them stand out from others and it's what makes them unique. America is a country influenced and made up of many cultures and has often been thought of as a melting pot. If we continue to drift away from our culture, starting by not speaking Igbo in our households, our children, our children's children, and all our future generations will drift even farther away from our culture until they forget

their origin completely. Our culture is what makes us who we are and we should do our best to keep it alive instead of helping to diminish it. According to Frances Pritchett, an American White woman, *a person who loses his language, loses his heritage*. Frances is the secretary general of SPLICA (Society for promoting Igbo Language and Culture in America). She advised Igbo people not to let their language die. Chinua Achebe also said, “nobody knows tomorrow...” If a white American woman can learn to write and speak Igbo language, why can't we?

In closing, my fellow junior, young and adult youths, with regards to our hopes and dreams, I have four questions:

- a. Who are the future hope of ICCUSA?
- b. How do we plan to sustain and maintain the ICCUSA legacy and keep it from collapsing?
- c. How do we plan to keep that road open after our grandparents and parents?
- d. What are our future goals?

When you leave here, think about it, and see how we (the youth & young adults) can contribute in making a difference and; making sure ICCUSA legacy continues from generation to generation.

On behalf of the NICCA Youths, I thank all of you.

God bless you all!

CHINYERE OHAYA BIOGRAPHY

Chinyere Ohaya is sixteen years old. She is an 11th grader at Sandy Creek High School in Fayetteville, Georgia. She has always been an honor student; Math and Science are her favorite subjects. She is the first of six children by Dr. & Mrs. Jude & Queenette Ohaya. Her parents are from the Igbo language speaking region of Eastern Nigeria. Chi-Chi, as she is fondly called last visited Nigeria with her parents when she was 10 years old, yet she is able to speak, write and read in Igbo. She also gives speeches in Igbo: In 2015, on Father's Day at Orlu Regional Union meeting, a welcome address in Igbo language to HRH Eze Nelson Nwosu, Igbo of Amaigbo at the Amaigbo Town Union National Convention held in Kansas City Missouri on July 3, 2015, and a welcome address in Igbo at Amaigbo Town Union Fundraising Event May 7, 2016. She has a very good appreciation of her Heritage and has taken full advantage of her grandma's presence and her family core values to advance her understanding of Igbo language and culture. Chinyere started playing violin at age six. At her school, she is in the solo/ensemble and Advanced Chamber orchestra. She is able to write music notes for both English and Igbo songs. She is a member of the Nigerian Igbo Catholic Community {NICCA} youth choir and the Nigerian Community choir at St Philip Benizi, Jonesboro, Georgia. She is a youth lector and has sung and read in Igbo several times at the Nigerian Igbo Catholic Community Atlanta (NICCA) monthly mass. Chinyere is also a member of the Nigerian Youth Alliance and Focus Children Foundation (<http://focuschildrenorganization.org/>), which is a cultural dance group and non-profit organization that helps kids with disability. In 2014, Chichi was presented an award as an exemplary youth in Igbo and African Catholic Community Atlanta Georgia by Bishop Luis Rafael Zarama, Auxiliary Bishop of Atlanta, at a banquet hosted by the Pan African Catholic Community, Atlanta. She serves as the treasurer of Key Club International at her school, which is an organization that performs acts of service in the community, such as collecting clothes, cleaning up parks, and organizing food drives. Chichi is from a good home and she is a God fearing, obedient, and very respectful girl.