

**ARCHBISHOP AUGUSTINE OBIORA AKUBEZE ADDRESS AT THE FOURTH
NATIONAL MISSION CONGRESS OPENING CEREMONY ON 23RD OCTOBER
2019 AT BISHOP KELLY PASTORAL CENTRE IN BENIN CITY, EDO
STATE**

1. INTRODUCTION: I warmly welcome all of you to Benin City, Edo State. On behalf of the entire members of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, of whom I am humble to be the President, I salute all the delegates from all the dioceses in Nigeria. I greet all the PMS Directors, CSN staff, priests, consecrated persons, and all my brother Bishops present. May our deliberations at this Congress make meaningful impact in the life of the Church in Nigeria.

2. BAPTISED AND SENT: THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN NIGERIA ON MISSION: The theme of the Congress is very theological. It was deliberately chosen to speak to us Catholics in Nigeria. The Church of Christ is described in *Lumen Gentium* no. 8 as follow:

This Church [that is, the Church of Christ] constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.

The Church of Christ is established by Christ himself through his death and resurrection. This Church subsists in the Catholic Church. The Church of Christ subsists in every parish and every diocese in the world.

This is the reason why we do not speak of the Nigerian Church, or the Abuja Church, or Owerri Church, or Ibadan Church or Benin Church. There are no national churches. There are no state churches. There are no city churches. There are no ethnic churches. There is no Nigerian Catholic Church. Nigeria do not own a Catholic Church. No nationality or ethnic group owns any Catholic Church. Therefore, we speak of the Church of Christ in Nigeria. The Church of Christ in Benin. The Church of Christ in Lagos. The Church of Christ in St Paul Catholic Church Benin City. This is the Church that is sent on mission.

We are incorporated into the Church of Christ through baptism. We are sent on Mission by virtue of our baptism. We are not sent on mission by virtue of our state of origin or place of birth. We are sent on mission by the fact that we are members of the Church of Christ. We belong to the Church of Christ in a particular diocese or parish through domicile. We do not belong to a diocese or a parish through place of origin. We should continue to educate our faithful so that this message can sink into our hearts.

The Church of Christ in Nigeria during this Congress should explore ways of bringing in new members into the Church. It should also examine ways of ensuring that Christ faithful are well cared for spiritually and materially in the Church. How do we take care of our members? How do we reach out to those who have abandoned the faith? How do we identify those who are facing challenges within the Church? How do we establish structures within the Church that care for those who are in irregular marriages? How do we encourage those in canonical challenging marriage situations to embrace the faith? How do we speak to a man who is already married to several wives to embrace the faith that preaches monogamy without exception? If the Church of Christ on

Mission in Nigeria is made up of sinner and saints, how do we deal with single mothers; how do we deal with those who are civilly divorced? The Church of Christ on Mission must include in her mission the *missio ad intra*, that is, mission within. As we go out to bring new members to the Church, we must be concerned about those who are not comfortable within. I do not have answers to all these questions. But I do hope that some of the papers and reflections will speak to some of these issues.

I will not want to give you a long theological thesis on the theme of the Congress because I do know that many experts have prepared papers ready to present to you. I do also hope that delegates will be actively engaged in the Congress. Express your views and those moderating the presentation should manage the time very well so that the opinions of individuals are well captured and questions are answered as much as possible. At the end of the Congress, we the Bishops expect you the delegates to go back to the Church in your local area and impact into your brothers and sisters the fruits of this Congress.