

**HOMILY FOR THE DEDICATION OF ST. AUGUSTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH,
UKHEGIE STREET, BENIN CITY ON 12 FEBRUARY 2019**

**+Augustine O. Akubeze
Archbishop of benin city**

THEME: THE CHURCH IS THE HOUSE OF GOD

1. INTRODUCTION: My dear people of God, history is being made in our Archdiocese today as we gather for the dedication of this beautiful edifice. The church is named after St. Augustine, it is run by the Augustinians, we have two Augustinian bishops here present, and I, the chief celebrant of today's occasion goes by the name Augustine. St. Augustine must be very proud in heaven to see all that is associated with his name. It has taken about three years of hard work, dedication and commitment from all of you to bring this project to completion. I must commend all those who have worked tirelessly to ensure that this project see the light of day. We cannot but thank Rev. Fr. Chioma Ihegbulem, who helped in saving the funds with which the project was started; Rev. Fr. Joachim Osigwe who laid the foundation of this Church and almost completed it and also Rev. Fr. David Aronokhale under whose leadership it has now been completed. I thank also the building committee members, the architect, the workers, and all of you who donated your time, talent and resources towards the completion of this project. May God bless all of you and replenish your purses a hundred-fold through Christ our Lord.

With the dedication of this church today, it will become the House of God, a House of prayer and a house of the church. We know that God is everywhere. Yet when the people of God erect a building and dedicate it totally to God's service, God's glory comes to dwell in that building in such a way that the building can now be called the house of God. Solomon recalls

this mystery in his prayer of dedication of the temple in Jerusalem: “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). As a House of God, it becomes a place where we can come to meet with the Lord and pour our hearts to him. It therefore becomes a house of prayer. As the people of God, we will gather to worship in spirit and in truth. We are thus the church and hence we can call this Church, *domus ecclesiae*, the house of the church.

At this mass also 42 of our brothers and sisters shall be enlisted into the army of Christ through the Sacrament of Confirmation. I congratulate them and pray that the Holy Spirit will inspire them to be true ambassadors of the church.

2. GREETINGS: I greet my Lord Bishop – Donatus Ogun (Bishop of Uromi Diocese), the Prior Provincial of the Augustinian Order, Nigerian Province; the Parish Priest, Very Rev and Rev. Fathers, Consecrated men and women, the Laity President, the CWO, CMO, and CYON Presidents of the Parish, as well as the building committee members, and the dedication committee under the leadership of Dr. Gaius Obaseki. I greet all the invited guests and all the friends of the Parish who have come to rejoice with you on this special day of the Dedication of your Church; traditional rulers, Gentlemen of the press, Security personnel, brothers and sisters in Christ. I am very happy to be in your midst today. I am pleased with the work you have done. I applaud all of you and urge that you continue the good work of God.

3. THE DEDICATION OF A CHURCH: The dedication of a Church is always a moment of grace. This is why today’s ritual of dedication is so much like our ritual of Baptism. At the beginning of this Mass, I sprinkled the entire building, the altar, the ambo, the sanctuary, and the people

gathered with the blessed water that recalls our own baptism, that which made us a part of God's holy people. I will soon proclaim a prayer of consecration over the new altar and smear its surface and then the walls of this church with the Oil of Chrism, the same oil with which the priest or deacon smears the head of a newly baptized child with the words, "Little child, as Christ was anointed priest, prophet, and king, so may you live always as a member of his holy people, sharing everlasting." The anointing marks us for a new use, a new holy mission in life. So, this altar and this place will be marked to be useful, to be missioned and directed towards our eternal salvation.

I think one could say, like the Psalmist in our Responsorial Psalm, about this new church, "Quam dilecta tabernacle tua Domine virtutum," "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts. It is truly a lovely place in which God will begin to dwell in a special way from today. God will dwell in the community gathered, the living Body of Christ. God will dwell in the Word proclaimed. God will dwell in the person of the priest standing "in persona Christi (in the person of Christ)," as Christ stands before the Father with all the angels and saints offering the eternal sacrifice of praise. God will dwell in the celebration of the Sacraments, most especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, the "summit and fount" of the Church's activity. God will dwell in the true Eucharistic presence of Jesus Christ in the tabernacle.

When a Church is dedicated it means it is now specially set aside for the praise, and worship of God. It becomes a sacred place where the sacraments are to be celebrated. It becomes a place where the petitions of the people are to be uplifted to God. It becomes a place where the people meet God, and discuss with God. It becomes a place where the people

listen to God. Therefore, the Church after today's dedication cannot be treated like an ordinary building. The blocks, paints, marble, light and everything in the Church may be the same with other buildings, but today, the rite of dedication will make this place a permanent dwelling place of God; a place where men and angels offer adoration to God.

It is the presence of Christ in the dedicated Church that makes the place sacred. It is a holy place because of Christ who is present in the Blessed Sacrament, because of the altar which is a symbol of Christ, because of the invocation of the saints and angels to bless it, because of the presence of the Trinity and because of the presence of the children of God. We are therefore to permeate the world with the fragrance of God just as the incense fills the building during the incensing of the Church. Wherever we go, we must bring Christ that we have encountered in the Church to the people. Let people know the difference in your life. Let them know that there is a difference between one who encounters Christ in the Church and one who has not met Christ. Let there be a change in your life. In the way you treat others, there must be a change. You cannot enter a dedicated Church where God dwells with his saints and angels and leave with bitterness in your heart. You cannot leave here to your house and start fighting your husband or wife. You cannot leave here and go out to get drunk. You cannot leave here and go home without any plans for your children. You cannot leave here and still be disobedient to your parents. You cannot leave here without having plans for your aged parents who are in the village. You cannot leave here and still go to work late. You cannot leave here and still ask or receive bribe before you perform your statutory function. You cannot leave here and get involved in rigging elections. When you leave this place, there should be a transformation in your life. When you leave here you should be

anxious to share the word of God that you have heard, and the Eucharistic meal that you have received. In other words, you must be willing to communicate the word of God to others.

4. THE FIRST READING:

In the first reading from the Prophet Nehemiah, we heard how Ezra the priest read the word of God from morning until midday, with the people listening attentively. The people had just returned from exile, they had just rebuilt their devastated city and the temple. They had gathered for the rededication of the temple and the first thing they did was to listen to the word of God. Indeed, they realized that on account of their disobedience to the Law they were taken captives and sent into exile. We heard too that as they listened, they wept. Anyone who fails to listen to the word of God prepares himself or herself for exile. The further we are away from the Church the further we distance our self from salvation.

The church is a place to listen to the word of God, which will be proclaimed every day from this pulpit. Like the people of Israel, we should always be attentive. We must endeavor to avoid distractions when the word of God is being proclaimed. God's word has something to say about every situation of your life. The word of God brings joy. The word of God brings consolation. The word of God brings hope. The word of God engenders faith. The word of God spurs us to love. This is why those who are selected to read in the church should endeavor to practice effectively before coming up here to proclaim the word, so that everyone listening will be able to understand. In proclaiming the word too, ministers of the word should be fearless and courageous. Priests are not to preach themselves from the pulpit. Priests must shun the temptation to preach prosperity gospel or to preach heresies. This is why we must always endeavor to study before we come up here to

preach. The pulpit is not a place to insult parishioners or campaign for any political party. We must all have reverence for the word of God.

5. THE SECOND READING (1 COR. 3:9C-11, 16-17):

In the second reading, St. Paul tells us that we are God's building, we are God's temple and the Spirit of God dwells in us. He says: "if any one destroys God's temple God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy and that temple you are" (1 Cor. 3:17). As a people of God, we are the church. And as the church is holy, we are called to be one and holy. Our penny catechism teaches us that there are four marks of the church: the church is one, the church is holy, the church is catholic and the church is apostolic. St. Augustine, your patron saint, gave a beautiful description of the church as the people of God in relation to a dedicated church. He says in an ancient homily and I quote:

"We are gathered together to celebrate the dedication of a house of prayer. This is our house of prayer, but we too are a house of God....What was done when this church was being built is similar to what is done when believers are built up in Christ. When they first come to believe, they are like timber and stone taken from the woods and mountains. In their instruction, baptism and formation they are, so to speak, shaped, leveled and smoothed by the hands of carpenters and craftsmen. "But Christians do not make a house of God until they are one in charity. The timber and stone must fit together in an orderly plan, must be joined in perfect harmony, must give each other support as it were of love, or no one would enter the building. When you see the stones and beams of a building holding together securely, you enter the

building with an easy mind, you are not afraid of it falling down in ruins”.

From this it becomes clear that as Christians just being together, even if we are all worshipping correctly and sharing the same prayers do not make us a house of God until we are all holy, one in love with God and one in love with each other. This is what the Eucharist makes present to us. At the Lord's command, we gather and enter the mystery of his passionate love for all of us unleashed at Calvary and made manifest in the Resurrection. The Holy Spirit draws us into Our Lord's paschal mystery, urging us to respond to God's love with our own love. We offer our love with the Risen Lord and offer our love like the Risen Lord. That only happens when we gather for the Eucharistic Prayer. The Lord's Body and Blood under the signs of bread and wine call us to become like Christ, cleanse us from what leads us away from Christ, nourishes us to continue the journey of becoming one with Christ, and opens our heart to greater love of God and of all the people we gather with. This is what makes us holy and true temples of God's spirit. Our communion of love with God and one another keep our differences from dividing us and allow our differences to become strengths.

This oneness is manifested in the place of worship. It is clearly shown that we are one when we gather together in one Church. The church building dedicated to God, is a visible sign of the pilgrim Church on earth and points to the Church in heaven. It therefore, means that praying in a dedicated Church should constantly remind us that the barriers created by tribe, ethnic background, societal stratifications, economic differences are broken down. The dedicated Church stands as a unique image of God's temple built from living stones. It is my prayer that as we gather here for worship and

prayer the Lord will make us truly one and truly holy through Christ our Lord.

6. THE GOSPEL READING (JOHN 2: 13-22)

The Gospel reading from John chapter 2 narrates the event of Christ when he entered the temple. We are told that he found out that the temple had become a place of commerce and in anger he over turned the tables of the money changers and drove all out of the temple, saying “you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade. The church is a house of prayer and worship. It is a place where we worship God in spirit and in truth. Part of the prayer of the dedication of a Church states and I quote: **“Lord send your Spirit from heaven to make this Church an ever-holy place, and this altar a ready table for the sacrifice of Christ. Here may the waters of baptism overwhelm the shame of sin; here may your people die to sin and live again through the grace as your children. Here may your children gathered around your altar, celebrate the memorial of the Paschal Lamb, and be fed at the table of Christ’s word and Christ’s body.”**

In this prayer of dedication, we implore God to make the Church a holy place. It means after this dedication it will no longer be a place, we meet to make noise, and chat. It will not be a place where we charge our phones. It will not be a place where we hold committee meetings. It will not be a place where we sell harvest items during bazaar. It will not be a place where we read novels or newspapers or magazines. It will be a holy place; a place of prayer and worship. The altar will be a table of sacrifice of Christ. The altar must be treated with respect and reverence. Only object and items directly connected to the Eucharistic sacrifice can be placed on it. No one is allowed to place other items not directly connected to the Eucharistic sacrifice on it.

Even when babies are brought to the Church after baptism, they are not to be placed on the dedicated altar. Petitions offered to God are not to be placed on the altar. We must give the church of God the respect due to it.

7. THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

To our dear brothers and sisters who will receive the Sacrament of Confirmation today, I congratulate you. Confirmation is a sacrament of maturity and responsibility that bestows on us the special gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is a sacrament that makes you ambassadors of the church. Be true ambassadors of the Church that you are called to serve. As soldiers of Christ arm yourselves with the tools of faith, hope and love. Be steadfast in prayer, attend mass daily, love the scriptures and meditate on it day and night, visit the Blessed Sacrament, pray your Rosary, read holy books (lives of saints and other good catholic literatures). Do not disappoint the church. May the Holy Spirit whom you will receive today make you worthy ambassadors of the church through Christ our Lord.

8. THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2019 General election is around the corner. We have just three days left. The political atmosphere is charged and we all are anticipating who our next leaders will be. As an Archdiocese we have embarked on a nine-day rosary novena for a peaceful poll. The novena started on the 7th of this month and will end on the 15th, a day before the presidential election. I do hope as a parish we are all participating in the ongoing novena? The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria also issued a statement recently calling all Catholics to pray for the success of the elections. We directed that all Catholics embark on three days fasting and prayer (especially the rosary) from tomorrow 13th -15th February, 2019. We know that God will answer our prayers for a peaceful election. May I also use this opportunity to call

on all Catholics to shun any form of violence during the elections. Elections should not be a do or die affair. Let us go to the polling stations and cast our votes peacefully and go home. I call on all parents to caution their children not to be used as political thugs or agents to rig the elections. May our elections be peaceful and may God help us to elect credible and responsible leaders who will serve Nigerians with the fear of God through Christ our Lord.

9. CONCLUSION

Once again, I congratulate the Parish Priest and the entire faithful of St. Augustine Catholic Church, for the hard work. Amidst dwindling resources, you ensured that you complete this beautiful Church. We can all see the fruit of your hard work. After the dedication of this Church you must continue to keep it clean. You must develop the culture of maintenance. A beautiful Church like this must not be allowed to become dirty, and ugly as the years run by. A beautiful Church like this must always have people coming in and out to pray. Always create the serene atmosphere that is required and expected of a sacred place. I assure you that whenever you come to this place to pray, God will answer your prayers. May this church be an avenue for God to bless you and your families. May this church become a well spring of holiness for all you. May this church bind you together as one and make you prosper in all you do through Christ our Lord. May the grace of God the Father, the love of God the Son and the communion of God the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Congratulations and may God bless you all!