

ARCHBISHOP AUGUSTINE OBIORA AKUBEZE HOMILY AT THE CHRISM MASS AT HOLY CROSS CATHEDRAL ON 18 APRIL 2019

THEME:

1. PROTOCOL

The Vicar General Very Rev Fr Augustine Ehigie
The Vicar for Clergy and the Cathedral Administrator Very Rev Fr Festus Omede
Episcopal Vicars, the Deans, and Members of the Curia
Very Rev Frs., and Rev Frs.,
Consecrated men and women
Members of the Laity Council and all invited Guests, Glory be to Jesus.
Honour unto Mary

2. INTRODUCTION: Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ who has given us the gift of the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist. This chrism Mass offers the opportunity to once again reflect on the dignity of the sacred ministerial priesthood. It offers the opportunity to acknowledge the sacrifices our priests are making in order to respond to the demands of the priestly life. At this celebration the Liturgy of the word brings out clearly the obligation of the priests to preach the good news to the faithful. The priests help the people to keep the covenant of the Lord. The priests help the people to know that God is the Alpha and Omega of our life. Nothing is beyond his reach. The priests through their functions bring about the mission of Christ to set the captives free, bring sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free.

The Chrism Mass is one of the principal expressions of the fullness of the bishop's priesthood and signifies the close unity of the priests with him. During this Mass, I shall consecrate the Oil for the Holy Chrism and bless the Oil of Catechumens and the oil of the Sick. The newly baptized are anointed and confirmed with the chrism consecrated by the bishop.

Catechumens are prepared and disposed for baptism with the oil of catechumens, and the sick are anointed in their illness with the oil of the sick. Note that this anointing of the sick is a sacrament and only a priest can administer it. It is not the same as the anointing people do with olive oil blessed by a priest. The oil for this sacrament is the oil blessed by the Bishop on Holy Thursday during the Chrism Mass every year. So, when you are sick, call on a priest to pray for you and to anoint you (James 5:14 – 15). And since baptism is the gateway to receiving other sacraments, this sacrament can only be administered on a baptized person.

As these oils are taken from here to every parish in the Archdiocese, may they bring about a deep renewal in the lives of all who are anointed with them, in the lives of all who accompany them with their love and prayers and in the lives of all who administer these sacraments, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

3. FIRST READING (ISAIAH 61:1-3ABCD, 6A, 8B-9): In the First Reading, the Prophet Isaiah tells us today that when God blesses us people will acknowledge it because it will be obvious: All who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are a people of whom the Lord has blessed.” This is a message of hope given to the Israelites during their exile in Babylon. They were captured, humiliated and taken to a foreign land. They were broken hearted. God promised to use the priests to console them: But you shall be called the priests of the Lord, men shall speak of you as the ministers of our God.

The functions of the priests include: sanctification of the people; teaching of the people; and governing of the people. God blesses his people through the priests he has chosen. The priest sanctifies the people through the administration of the sacraments and sacramentals.

Through the sacrament of the anointing of the sick he brings the healing of Christ to many. Through the sacrament of the sacrament of confession he brings Christ forgiveness to the people. Through the sacrament of baptism, he brings new members to the Church. Through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, he makes Christ present body, blood, soul, and divinity. Through the sacrament of confirmation that a priest is to administer under certain circumstances, he empowers the faithful to preach the Gospel with courage. Through the sacrament of matrimony to which the priest is a witness who asks and receives the consent on behalf of the Church he creates a domestic church in which Christ is present.

The blessings of God come to the people through the functions performed by the priest. Priests are important in the life of the Church. The priesthood and Eucharist were instituted on the same day. This fact points to the reality of the inseparability of the priesthood and the Eucharist. The faithful are therefore obliged to pray for the priest. Pray for them to minister the sacraments faithfully to the people of God. Pray for them to be healthy enough to render services in their various places of assignment. Encourage them in their ministries. Encourage and support them especially those who work in the rural areas. Some of these priests work where there is no light, no water, and sometimes face serious loneliness when almost every inhabitant of the village have gone to farm. For many of these people in the villages, the priest has all the answer to their questions. They come to the priest for both material challenges and spiritual challenges. They appeal and beg to get help to pay school fees from the priest. When their children are sick, they ask for assistance to go to the nearest clinic. When their faith is challenged by tragedy they come to the priest. Faced with these challenges the priest still has to seek ways to spiritually enrich himself so that he can be available to the people.

Therefore, the priest needs more of our support than criticism. It is better to pray for a priest than to gossip about him. It is better to advise him than to destroy his reputation unlawfully. It is better to seek clarifications from him than to prejudge him before you hear him. It is better to treat all priests with respect than to be selective in whom you respect. Do not respect priests because they are in financially wealthy parishes. Do not respect priest because of their level of education. Do not respect priests because of where they studied. Do not respect priests because of their perceived closeness to the Bishop. Do not respect priest because of their material wealth. Do not respect priests because of their capacity to complete building projects in short time. Do not respect priests because of their connection to wealthy people in the society. Do not respect priests for what they possess temporary. Do not respect priests because they are from your ethnic extraction. Do not support priests because you like them. Do not support the ministry of priests just because they listen and do what you suggest.

Respect priests because they are *alter-Christus*, that is, another Christ. Respect priests because they act and function in *persona Christi*, that is, in the person of Christ. Respect priests because they are configured to Christ. Respect priests because when they bless you it is Christ that blesses. Respect priests for who they are, people who are ontologically transformed to the person of Christ. Support them because they are ministers of Christ. Support them even when you disagree with them. Support them even when you do not like what they tell you during homilies. Support them because you love God and his Church.

To my dearly beloved priests, I say to you, thank you for all the sacrifices you make in your various places of assignment. Never get tired of doing what is right. The Lord who has called you will never abandon you. God

is the one who called you. You were not called by your bishop. The bishop is the vicar of Christ but never Christ himself. So, you must be true to yourself in your service to Christ in the Church. As the vicar of Christ in the Archdiocese, I have the obligation to ensure that you my dear priests are always close to God to whom you have left everything to follow.

4. THE SECOND READING (REVELATION 1:5-8): In the Second reading we read, “I am the Alpha and Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” The declaration that God is the beginning and the end shows us that there is nothing beyond the reach of God. Nothing came before him. Nothing overpowers God. Nothing in the future can take God by surprise. As we are seated in the Church today, we may have come here with various challenges. We may have come here with joy, pain, sorrow, expectations, and disappointments. I do not know what you have in your hearts but I know that the God we worship is Alpha and Omega. God is senior to all your problems. God has liberated people from the same kind of problem you have. The Almightyness of God indicates to us that we can place our trust in him and not be disappointed.

God has freed us from our sins through the sacrifice of the blood of Christ. The priest raises the host and says to the people, this is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is exactly what is expressed in the Book of Revelation we have just read. To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. God’s kingdom has dominion over all evil forces. We therefore reiterate to our people that there is no need to be afraid of the evil one because God is Alpha and Omega; because God is Almighty;

because God's dominion lasts forever and ever. Some of you are paralyzed with fear when you are threatened by people that "you will see". Some of you go as far as seeking some other spiritual protection through traditional religious practices. Some of you still offer sacrifices to gods that have mouths but cannot speak, that have eyes but cannot see. Some of you still seek promotion at your places of work through the intervention of gods who have no power to help you. Some of you enter into secret societies that require you to make commitment that are contrary to God's ways. I tell you, there is no need to remain on the path of perdition. Come out of that secret cult you belong to. Come out and enjoy the freedom of reigning with Christ in his kingdom. Come out and enjoy true peace and serenity that you can never obtain in the secret cult.

In the recent past, we have heard of cults fighting each other in Benin City. I want to tell our youths that you can gain no peace by being a cultist. I want to tell our youths that there is no bright future if you remain a cultist. Come to Christ and submit to him. Christ is the one that can grant you true protection. The guns, axes, cutlasses that you possess cannot secure your life. No matter how safe you may think you are today, if you do not come out, one day you most likely will lose your life to brutal murder. Even more tragic is the fact that if you remain in this evil society, you may lose your soul. To our youths, we say, cultism is not a path way to success. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, come to him and let him set you free.

5. THE GOSPEL READING (LUKE 4:16-21): This Gospel passage from Luke is considered the manifesto of Christ. Christ has come to preach the good news, to set captives free, to give sight to the blind and liberty to those who are oppressed. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. The good news is that all those held captive will never be captive forever.

All that are oppressed will never remain oppressed forever. All those suffering from blindness because of ignorance will be enlightened. We speak to all those who are oppressing us today. We have people who oppress us on our roads by kidnapping us. We have people who oppress us by misappropriating public funds with impunity. We have those who oppress us by rigging our elections. We have those who oppress us by marginalizing us. We have those who hold us captive by ensuring that they continue to show the seeds of division and mutual hatred among us so that they can take advantage of our divisions. To these oppressors I say, turn away from evil and believe the Gospel. To those who think that we will remain a voiceless people in the face of oppression I say, the Lord will fight for us. The Lord has spoken for us, he has declared us freed.

Some of our youths were used by some politicians to wreck havoc in some parts of the country. There is no hiding place for those who seek the destruction of the lives of others. To these youths I say, for how long will you continue to allow yourselves to be used by selfish people who have no love for you. You do not mean anything to them. You are just like an instrument to be used and dumped. Do they remember you after election? Do they give you appointments? They only give you money to destroy your future and you gladly oblige. You are blinded by your desire for quick riches. We entrust all youths who are in this category to the hands of God. May they experience conversion of hearts.

6. EXTRAORDINARY MISSION MONTH: The Holy Father has declared October 2019 Extraordinary Mission Month. The goal of this is stated by the Holy Father in his Letter to Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of People. Pope Francis says the extraordinary mission month is “with the aim of fostering an increased awareness of the *Missio ad Gentes* and taking up again with renewed

favour for the missionary transformation of the Church's life and pastoral activity." The extraordinary mission month is in commemoration of the centenary of Pope Benedict XV *Maximum Illud* issued 1919. As part of the celebration, the Congregation for the Evangelization of People published the manual for the celebration. In Part Two of this document, twenty-five mission testimonies were given. Twenty-five saints and those in the process towards sainthood were chosen. We are happy to note that Blessed Tansi and our own Vivian Ogu were chosen. The life of Vivian bears witnesses to the fact that there are some of our youths who strive genuinely for purity and holiness of life. The testimonies about Vivian Ogu are now known worldwide. I therefore await the petition from the Director of the Vivian Ogu Movement for the opening of the diocesan phase of the process of beatification of this wonderful daughter of ours. The Archdiocese will be celebrating the tenth anniversary of her death in November this year. Vivian was a true missionary who went out to preach the Gospel. She preached this Gospel even with her last breath because she refused to be violated by the armed robbers who wanted to sexually assault her. She paid the supreme sacrifice to let us know that obedience to God is more important than obedience to man. What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?

The Archdiocese of Benin City has been chosen to host the National Mission Congress 22-28 October 2019. I have already inaugurated the Local Organizing Committee. We have appointed Very Rev Fr. Stephen Chukwuma Dumbiri, the PMS Director as the Chairman. We appeal to everyone to give this committee the needed support so that we can have a good national celebration. The standard we have already set in the hosting of the National Marian Year Congress in October 2017 must be maintained and possibly improved upon.

7. **CONCLUSION:** Dearly beloved brothers in the priesthood, I greet you once again and thank you for accepting to work for Christ as priests. Shortly, we will be renewing our priestly promises. I call on you to take these promises seriously. Live out the evangelical promises of celibacy, obedience and poverty. Our lay faithful must assist our priests with prayers and support to ensure that they keep their promises to God. Violation of the promises damage the image of Christ and causes obstacles to the acceptance of the Gospel we are to preach.

Let us live out our priestly commitment with trust in the grace of Christ who never fails us. I invite you my dear priests not to be afraid to overcoming challenges to the observance of these commitments. God never gives us a task that is bigger than us. He will always supply us with his graces. Let us therefore entrust ourselves to the maternal care of the Blessed Virgin Mary who is the mother of the clergy. May she protect us and help us to always reflect the true face of Christ to the people of God. May God bless his words in our hearts and make them bear fruits through Christ our Lord. Amen.