

**ARCHBISHOP AUGUSTINE OBIORA AKUBEZE HOMILY AT THE PRIESTLY
ORDINATION ON 19TH OCTOBER 2019 AT ST JOHN VIANNEY CATHOLIC
CHURCH BENIN CITY**

**THEME: PRIESTLY FRATERNITY AND SOLIDARITY IN THE COMMUNION
OF THE PRESBYTERATE**

1. PROTOCOL: I greet all of you who have come to celebrate with the Archdiocese of Benin City on this occasion of the priestly ordination of three candidates. I greet my Vicar General, the Chancellor, my Episcopal Vicars, my close collaborators in the governance of the Archdiocese, the Parish Priest of St John Vianney, the Vocations Director and the Vocations Team, formators who are present here, consecrated men and women, the parents, family members and friends of the ordinands, and the ordinands themselves. I greet the three of you for your perseverance and your willingness to serve the people of God. I salute the Laity officers, the Knights and Ladies, and all of you who have come here today to thank God for the gift of the priesthood to humankind.

My special thanks and recognition to those who joined us in meeting the financial obligations for the formation of these candidates. At the appropriate time the names of the sponsors will be announced to you. It is always a great thing to join the formation of future priests for the Church. May God bless you as you continue to support the work of God.

2. COLLABORATION: ESSENTIAL IN THE FULFILMENT OF PRIESTLY MINISTRY: Anyone who wants to be a priest and work in isolation is not faithful to the spirit of the vocation to the priesthood. By its very nature every priest is called to work in solidarity with others. Christ himself invited collaborators to join him in the mission of preaching the good news. He sent seventy disciples out, and he chose twelve apostles to administer his church. These apostles and their successors appointed Bishops and Priests to continue to work of Christ. There is no room for a priest in the Archdiocese who wants to work alone. From Moses to Christ, we discover constant collaboration in the ministry. From the

readings we shall reflect upon in a few minutes time, we will come to realize that God never wanted us to work alone. For every mission God gives us, he wants us to work in collaboration.

The rite of the priestly ordination includes the laying on of hands by concelebrating priests upon the heads of the newly ordained. This act symbolizes solidarity in the ministry. The Second Vatican Council declares in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 8: “All priests, being constituted in the order of the priesthood through the sacrament of Order, are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood; but in a special way they form one priestly body in the diocese to which they are attached under their own bishop. For even though they may be assigned different duties, yet they fulfil the one priestly service for the people.” All priests should seek to understand each other and be hospitable to each other. The readings chosen for this celebration underpin the need for solidarity in ministry.

3. THE READINGS: (First Reading: Numbers 11:11b-12,14-17, 24-25a –Responsorial Psalm 84:3, 4, 5, 11: Second Reading: Acts 20:17-18a, 28-32, 36, Gospel Acclamation: John 10:14: Gospel Reading: John 10:11-16): In the first reading, Moses went into dialogue with God regarding the nature of the work God has given to him. Moses started with a complaint saying: “Why do you lay the burden of all this people upon me?” The bases of his query are the fact that he was not the one who brought the people into existence, why should God expect him to lead the people to the promised land that God himself swore to them? Moses goes on to conclude that he is not able to carry all this people alone because the burden is too heavy for him.

When we closely examine the text, we will discover that Moses is not totally rejecting the work or the vocation God has called him to live out. Moses rather is saying he cannot do it alone. Moses is ready to carry the

burden of some of them but not all of them. Moses is ready to collaborate with others in leading the people to the promised land. He discovered that as a human being, even when God calls you, your human limitation is still there. You get tired of attending to the people he has entrusted to your care. No one can carry the people of God alone. No one can do the work alone. Moses could not do it alone.

God's response to Moses is instructive. God said to Moses: "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them." Moses who given the task of discerning which of the elders to pick. But God clearly laid down the criteria for the selection. These elders must be people whom Moses knew and they must be people who have already exercised some form of authority over the people. It is part of our duties as Christians to ensure that only those who are capable of fulfilling the functions of the priest are selected for ordination. It is not just the work of the Vocations Team or the Formators alone. All of us need to give the necessary information to ensure that only those capable of participating in this function of God is allowed to be ordained.

God took some of the spirit upon Moses and put it upon the seventy elders. This very act of God points to the very fact of the fundamental equality among these elders. It is the same spirit that Moses had that they now have. They prophesied just like Moses did. They acted in union with Moses and respected his authority. These elders led the people of God and consulted with Moses from time to time when difficult cases came up. To my dear sons, soon to be ordained priests, it is true that you are going to receive the same sacred power of orders like all other priests who were ordained before you. When you bless as a priest, there will be no hierarchy of blessings. The same effect will be realised from the blessings impacted by a priest who is one year old and one who is forty years old in the priesthood. The same spirit and power is given to them.

Since the power comes from God, it is immutable, it does not change with age or with time.

Nevertheless, the elders always referred the more difficult cases to Moses, even though they had the same spirit. Dearly beloved in Christ, the sacred power of Orders does not come with experience. Anointing and ordination do not supply for the wisdom that comes from experience. This explains the reason why young priests must learn to consult elderly priests. Learn to ask questions in pastoral areas that are not clear. No one expects you to know everything. You may speak more eloquently than some of the elderly priests. People may applaud your homilies more than some of the elderly priests. But you do not have the pastoral experience they have and you cannot gain it simply by the number of lay faithful who applaud your wonderful and eloquent homilies. It is important for you to learn to consult your elder brothers in the priesthood. To the elderly ones, I say, please create a conducive environment that will encourage the younger ones to be ready and willing to consult you.

In the second reading of today, Paul addressed the priests in Ephesus. The same address is relevant for these candidates for ordination. Paul said they should take heed to ensure that they feed the flock to which the Holy Spirit has made them guardians. He went on to warn them to be careful of those who will arise among them who will mislead the faithful in the area of doctrine. Priests must be alert to discover and repudiate erroneous teachings. We are called to feed the flock of Christ with the message of Christ. St Paul reminds us that Christ has obtained the flock with his own blood. The flock belongs to Christ. We are all guardians of the flock of Christ. We must guard this flock of Christ in collaboration and in solidarity among brother priests. We must join hands together to build up the people of God. We must never become the source of disunity among the faithful.

Whenever a priest is assigned to a parish, he must ensure that he equally promotes all the societies in the parish. To my beloved priests, I say, do not praise one society and condemn another society in the Church. Every lay apostolate society that the Church has approved must be supported by all priests. It is always sad when we hear sayings like; “this priest is a Marian priest, the other priest is a Holy Ghost filled priest, anointed priest; demon destroyer priest,” etc. Every priest is filled with the Holy Spirit. Every priest should be a Marian priest. It is true that one may have certain inclination towards some lay apostolate groups because it suits our personal piety or personal spirituality or devotion. As priests we must avoid the temptation of imposing our personal piety upon people. We must be priests for everyone. Every parishioner should see us as their priest, who is interested in the growth and development of their society.

To the candidates for priestly ordination, I urge you to always pray like the Psalmist did in the Responsorial Psalm of today. “Blessed are they who dwell in the house of the Lord”. You must long and yearn to be in God’s presence. Put yourself in God’s presence through frequent visitations to the Blessed Sacrament, through faithful recitation of the rosary, and through serious observance of the Liturgy of the Hours. You must prefer the house of God to all other places. You must let the faithful know that you are proud to identify yourself as a priest all the time. After ordination, do not form the habit of not wearing your cassock. The Church desires holy priests. The Church wants priests who are living out their lives as priests both interiorly and exteriorly. The cassock does not make a monk but it helps us to know a monk. To both young and elderly priests I say, Fathers, please always wear your cassock.

One major task of the priest is to sacrifice his comfort for the good of the people of God. In the Gospel of John that we just listened to, Christ tells us that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Every day, you are called to lay down your life for the people of God. Through the

evangelical vows of chastity, you have sacrificed sexual pleasure to be available for the people of God. This is part of laying down your life for the faithful. You must therefore seek to live out this evangelical vow both publicly and privately. Through the evangelical counsel of poverty, you are to die to the desire to acquire material wealth. You must learn to live a simple life. Luxurious and flamboyant display of material wealth is incompatible with the priestly life. Christ to whom we are configured was factually poor and very detached from material wealth. We must follow Christ in this direction. The evangelical vow of obedience requires us to submit our will to that of our superior. You may be more intelligent than your parish priest, you may have better ideas or visions than him, you must nonetheless be obedient to him. You must know that obedience is important in following of Christ. Avoid the wrong mentality that some develop after ordination. They keep saying that they have arrived. With this mindset, they conclude that the era of taking instruction from the superior is over. They deceive themselves by saying that we are now priest nothing can happen to us. We can no longer be asked to withdraw from formation. This mindset stops a person from growing. Anyone who has arrived need not work further because he or she has reached the destination. The priesthood is not your final destination my dear priests. Heaven is our final point of arrival. The priesthood is a means that we can use to arrive at our destination. The priesthood is not an end in itself. We priests must always be conscious of this fact that we are fellow pilgrims with those entrusted to our care.

4. MISSIONARY YEAR: In few days time we shall be hosting the entire Nation in the National Mission Congress. During this period delegates from all dioceses in Nigeria will be in Benin City. Papers and reflections on the life of the Church on Mission will be examined. Catholic Bishops in Nigeria will be here to join in this Congress. The closing Mass will be

next week Saturday 26 October 2019 at the Vivian Ogu Centre, off Sapele Road Benin City. We hope to see all of you there.

In this missionary year that we have declared in our Archdiocese, we must be constantly conscious of the need to increase the number of Catholics. We must take evangelization seriously. I call on all Catholics in the Archdiocese to join us in this call to mission. We want the Church to be close to everyone in the Archdiocese. Establishment of outstations and parishes is aimed at making this possible. We have already mandated the Deans to work out modalities for establishment of outstations that hopefully will metamorphose into a parish. We have a current map of the Archdiocese and Deaneries, showing parishes, outstations, institutions and communities. From these maps we expect clear identification of areas for concentration for evangelization. This work is not for priests alone. All the faithful must be involved in it. Let us continue to appeal to our Mother Mary the Queen of the mission to intercede for us.

5. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA COMMUNIQUE: I will like to make a few remarks relating to the recent Communique of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. In our second plenary of the year, we members of the CBCN addressed many issues that affects the life of the Church and the nation. Addressing the priests, we noted that there is need for priests and religious to be mentors to young boys and girls. They must treat them with care and love. "All forms of abuse of minors and vulnerable adults are to be abhorred, since they are a betrayal not only of the confidence our people repose in us but also of our vocations and ministry as priests and religious," Every one of us must ensure that we work hard to ensure that the moral voice of the Church is not compromised because of scandal committed by priests and religious.

CBCN also addressed the need for priests and religious to live a simple life style. Speaking on this matter CBCN stated and I quote: “We also insist that the times call for holiness of life and more sacrifice on the part of all priests and religious if we are to be true to our vocations. All priests and religious must exercise discretion and be committed to a life of simplicity that is consistent with the life of the Master, who had nowhere to lay his head (cf. Lk 9:57-58). An ostentatious and materialistic life of luxury draws unnecessary attention and portends counter witnessing.” I have already mentioned the need for us priests to live out the evangelical vow of poverty. We priests must be a counter witness against the ills of the gospel of prosperity in a society that is suffering from great poverty.

6. CONCLUSION: Dearly beloved in Christ, we thank God who is blessing the Archdiocese of Benin City with more labourers in the vineyard of God. These three young men will be ordained for the sacred priesthood today. We congratulate them for their achievements. To these candidates for the priesthood I say, be faithful to the ministry you are entering. As you are ordained today, you will be living a life of total dedication to the Church. Be not afraid to take up the priestly functions because if you open yourself up for the grace of God, you will not fail. We are all praying that you will not disappoint yourself, your family, the Church, and God who has called you. We entrust you into the hands of our Lady, the Queen of the Clergy. Be close to Mary the mother of Christ. She will always show you the best way to bear witness to her Son. May God bless all of you and bless his words in our hearts through Christ our Lord. Amen.