

**ARCHBISHOP AUGUSTINE OBIORA AKUBEZE HOMILY ON 1  
JANUARY 2019 AT OKO PRISON**

**Theme: God is With Us**

**Protocol**

Very Rev. Fr. David Ogun, Chaplain

Very Rev. and Rev. Frs.,

Consecrated Men and Women

The Representative of the Executive Governor of Edo State, Mrs. J. Olatunji

Other Government Functionaries present here

The Comptroller General of Oko Prisons

The Vice Chairman of the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, Mr.  
Agenmomwen

The Archdiocesan Laity President, Mrs. C. I Ijehede

The CMO, CWO, Presidents and Presidents of other Societies here  
Present

My dear inmates,

My dear brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory be to Jesus!

**1. Introduction:** Happy New year to you all! Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ who has given us the opportunity to celebrate another year. We must ever remain thankful to God because we owe him every second and minute of our lives. I greet the inmates of this facility - Happy New Year to you all. May 2019 bring your joy and peace that only God can give. My warm greetings to the officers who administer this facility. I salute the Jesuit community of St. Joseph who have been providing catechesis and spiritual assistance to the inmates of this prison. To all priests, consecrated men and women, and the laity president I say welcome to the celebration of the first day of the secular calendar. As we celebrate with our brothers and sisters in this facility, we also welcome

all those who have come here with gifts for our friends who are held in this place.

**2. THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD:** This solemnity celebrates the greatness of God in Christ. In this celebration we are reminded that Christ is the second person of the Holy Trinity. Christ, who is both human and divine, came into the world through the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary provided God with the human nature through which Christ redeemed us. The motherhood of God! What a beauty to recall that God himself has a mother. All of us connected to Christ through baptism share the same mother with Christ. We are therefore celebrating our mother today. Mary is the mother of all of us. If God is our Father who came to redeem us through the death and resurrection of Christ who is the Son of Mary; all of us are therefore sons and daughters of Mary, the Mother of God.

The Collect of today's mass states: "Grant we pray, that we may experience the intercession of her, through whom we were found worthy to receive the author of life, our Lord Jesus Christ." What does it mean to experience the intercession of Mary? The prayer also acknowledged that we humans were found worthy to receive Christ the giver of life through Mary's participation. This implies that Mary's role in the history of salvation is irreplaceable. No, saint, no angel, can take the place of Mary. It was not the angels that brought us Christ. It was through Mary who was willing to do whatever God asked of her that we got the saviour of the world. Christ brought God's blessings to us. Mary remains therefore the instrument through which God continue to bless us through Christ. Always remember that no one goes to Mary and not find Christ. No one goes to Christ and not find Mary. Since the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit upon Mary, Christ has remain inseparably connected to Mary, his mother.

The Post Communion prayer of today's Mass dates back to the Liturgy used in the seventh century. The prayer invokes Mary as Mother of the Church. It is the first recorded instance when this Marian title appeared in the Church's liturgy. Mary is not only the Mother of God, she is also the mother of the Church. We all know the functions of a good mother. She nurtures the child from conception, and during his or her life. Motherhood entails care. Every mother should be a caregiver. To provide care requires vigilance and closeness between the one who is cared for and the caregiver. Therefore, we must endeavour to be close to Mary the mother of the Church. Every true son and daughter of the Church is also a son and daughter of Mary.

**3. GOOD POLITICS IS AT THE SERVICE OF PEACE:** Today also is the World Day of Peace. January 1<sup>st</sup> every year, the church celebrates the World Day of Peace. This year's celebration is the 52<sup>nd</sup> edition. The Pope has chosen for this year the theme: **“Good Politics is at the Service of Peace”**. For us in Nigeria this theme is more relevant than ever as we prepare for another round of General Elections. The Pope emphasizes the responsibility of each one in politics. Political responsibility belongs to every citizen and, in particular, to those that have received the mandate to protect and to govern. Politics should be geared towards the common good. Quoting Pope Paul VI, Pope Francis says **“to take politics seriously at its different levels – local, regional, national and worldwide – is to affirm the duty of each individual to acknowledge the reality and value of the freedom offered him to work at one and the same time for the good of the city, the nation and all mankind”** (Message for World Day of Peace, 2)

The Pope went on to say that Politics is for service. He says **“...but when political life is not seen as a form of service to society as a**

**whole, it can become a means of oppression, marginalization and even destruction”** (Message for World Day of Peace, 2). Our politicians and every public officer must take this seriously. The position you occupy should be an opportunity to serve. Service that will include providing the people you serve with the basic social amenities, paying their salaries as at when due, prompt payment of pensions, creation of job opportunities, encouraging respect for the rule of law and ensuring that there is justice, transparency and honesty in the land. When you take a look at our country today shows that this is lacking in many of our leaders. The result is the suffering that Nigerians undergo. I speak to our politicians today; put an end to your corrupt practices. Put an end to your propaganda. Put an end to your unhealthy rivalries. Put an end to hate feelings and hate speeches. Put an end to the sufferings of Nigeria by working out good economic policies that will be for the good of all. In this way you will be truly seen as serving the people who have voted you into power.

Good politics the Pope continues should engender respect for the basic human rights and peace. When this happens the Pope says that political life can indeed become an outstanding form of charity (Message for World Day of Peace, 3). When our leaders are truly seen to be working hard to alleviate the sufferings of the people then they can be trusted. There is no peace without mutual trust. And trust has, as the first condition, respect for the given word. How can you trust a leader who lies to you? How can you trust a leader who tells you one thing whereas the opposite is the case? We have witnessed in this country projects commissioned which in reality have not been completed. We have experienced projects completed with the most substandard of materials. The reason behind the many roads that give away a week or two after commissioning; the street lights that come on only on the day of

commissioning and the bore hole that supplies water only a week after commissioning.

On election, the Pope says, it should be an opportunity to return the original blue print. **“Every election and re-election, and every stage of public life, is an opportunity to return to the original points of reference that inspire justice and law”** (Message for World Day of Peace, 3). We must take this point seriously as we prepare for our General elections in the New Year. Those who will be elected should go back to the drawing board and see the road map of this country and see how they can return the country to the right track. We seem to have lost our compass for progress and success. And so I call on all of you the electorate to vote for candidates who will deliver on their electioneering promises. Do not be deceived by those who give you money and share food items. Look at the credibility of the candidates and vote only those who can restore the lost glory of our country and alleviate our sufferings. We are tired as country of the many years of hearing that “they are on top of the situation”, we are tired of having to beg for our rights as citizens, we are tired of the many years of the same set of leaders leading us, we are tired of the too many lies and corruption.

The Pope also has a word for our politicians concerning the youths. He says that good politics should encourage participation of the young. **“When the exercise of political power aims at only protecting the interest of a few privileged individuals, the future is compromised and young people can be tempted to the margins of the society without the possibility of helping to build the future. But when politics concretely fosters the talents of young people and their aspirations, peace grows in their outlook and on their faces”** (Message for World Day of Peace, 5). I

sincerely wish every political holder will get a copy of this message and read as we enter a New Year. Our youths need to be engaged to prevent them from taking to crime. Our youths need a platform to showcase their talents. They cannot go to the university and come out and then become a PA to one who never went through the four walls of a University. We must encourage our youths by allowing them a chance in politics.

The Pope says there should be no war, proliferation of arms as these will only lead to an increase of fear and terror in the land. Instead he advocates for a great project of peace. Peace that will bring about mutual responsibility of political holders and citizens. Peace with oneself that will reject anger and impatience. Peace with others, that is, our family members, friends, strangers, the poor and the suffering. He concludes by saying that a politics of peace must draw inspiration from those beautiful words of the Magnificat of our mother Mary, the Queen of peace, **“He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm; he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly;...for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever** (Message for World Day of Peace, 7). So let us take seriously the words of Pope Francis as we begin the Year and ensure that Politics is geared towards service of the people.

**4. THE READINGS (FIRST READING: NUMBERS 6:22-27; SECOND READING: GALATIANS 4:4-7: AND GOSPEL READING: LUKE 2:16-21):**

In the First Reading, the Lord instructs Aaron the priests on how to bless the people at the beginning of the year. It says: “The Lord bless and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” This rite of blessings is present in our rite of solemn blessing at the beginning of

the year. In this blessing we make recourse to God to keep us. Divine preservation from all harm. Our sustenance is dependent upon God. It is only when his face shines upon us that we can be lifted up.

In the Second reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul reminds us that God sent his son to us at the fullness of time. Jesus came at the appointed time – at the right time. So as we begin the year let us wait for the right time for things to take their course. Let us not be in a hurry but be patient. God was patient with us from the time of the fall of our first parents till the birth of his Son. We too should learn to be patient. We must apply this patience to the resolutions we make at the beginning of the year. We must be patient with ourselves and with God and wait for his appointed time.

In the Gospel reading we are told that the shepherds narrated all that they have been told by the angel and the people were astonished and they left praising God for all they had heard and seen. Mary we are told, kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. She was not quick to speak but was very attentive and reflective. Let us be more reflective in our actions. Those who think properly before acting never make serious mistakes.

**5. VISITATION TO THE PRISON:** Christ identifies with us not because of our holiness but because of His Holiness. Christ is the one who comes to make us worthy. He is the one who makes us free. In the Gospel of Matthew 25:36 Jesus says when I was in prison you visited me. Dear inmates of this facility, Christ is saying to you today, that he identifies with you. Any good done towards these inmates is done to Christ. Any gift given to them is given to Christ. Anyone who denies them of their rights is denying Christ of his rights. Whatever may have brought you into this prison is not beyond the mercy of God to wipe away. Sometimes, the justice system may not have been fair to some of you,

especially the many of you awaiting trial. But remember God has never forsaken you. Christ love you so much and he wants you to continue to enjoy the joy of the good news. There is joy that comes from knowing Christ. Strive daily to know him better. Strive daily to serve him better. Strive daily to prepare yourselves for heaven.

Hope for a Better Future: As we begin 2019, we must move with hope. It is only through hope for a better future can we overcome our challenges. The theological virtue of hope requires us to believe in God and to desire eternal union with God. The theological virtue which is a supernatural gift bestowed by God through which one trusts God will grant eternal life and the means of obtaining it provided one cooperates. Hope is composed of desire and expectation together with a recognition of the difficulty to be overcome in achieving eternal life. To have hope is to have expectation, goals, objectives etc.

Never live a hopeless life. A hopeless life is a life without expectations. We have both earthly and heavenly expectations. Our earthly expectation must be in line with our heavenly hope. Once we know our expectations, then we must seek the right means to fulfil our earthly expectations. If we have hope of spending eternity with God, we must seek to live a life of perfection.

**6. THE MOTHER OF GOD AND THE LIFE OF PERFECTION:** The Joy of Christmas is the fact that God has taken our human nature. The Word became flesh. Mary provided God with the flesh and blood to redeem humankind. The name of the child born is Emmanuel, God is with us. This name shows us that God does not abandon us. God is with us in every situation. God is with us when we are sick; God is with us when we are healthy; God is with us when we are rich; God is with us when we are poor; God is with us when we are in prison. It just does not matter where you are Emmanuel is there. God is with you. To our dear inmates, I want



to reassure you that God is with you. No matter what is the reason that has brought you into this facility, God has not abandoned you.

Mary the Mother of God never abandons her children. From the care she provided for Christ we can see that Mary is always there in the lives of those who entrust themselves to her. Mary protected Christ when his life was endangered. Mary nurtured Christ and taught him many things about the challenges of life. Mary was there in the last moment of Christ on earth. At the foot of the cross Mary was there. Even after death she was there to bury the dead body of Christ. In life we may have some friends who are with us when things are going well but when things are not going well, they walk out of our lives. I can imagine some of the inmates of this facility experiencing abandonment from some friends and family members. There are some of you who are here that no one seems to care about you. But I have good news for you today, Christ, Emmanuel cares about you. Mary the Mother of God cares about you. Therefore, do not feel abandoned.

**7. APPEAL TO EDO STATE GOVERNMENT:** I want to use this opportunity to specially recognise the representative of the Governor of Edo State, Mr Godwin Obaseki (Mrs. J. Olatunji who is the permanent Secretary, Directorate of Cabinet, Political and Special Service). We are grateful to the Governor for responding to our appeal to be present here today. I want you to help convey our appreciation to him for the good work he and his deputy are doing in the area of road repairs. As we noted in our letter, His Excellency, has brought a true professional approach to governance in Edo State. Road in places that are remote are repaired without any significant ceremony. Statutory functions of Government must never be raised to extraordinary level. This professionalism is what Mr Governor has brought into play in Edo State. Work hard, and make less noise or better still no noise at all.

I wrote to the Governor appealing to him to grant executive pardon to some of the prisoners. I think this is a good way to begin the New Year. The Governor has assured us that he has directed the matter to the appropriate quarters. In addition, he also expressed his willingness to respond to some of the request you the inmates and management of this facility will make today. We do have a Governor who wants to listen to your needs. As a Church we have always been here for you. We are aware that we have the obligation to show the face of Christ to you. We know that no amount of crime can make a person irredeemable or irreformable. We are of the opinion that the Governor also shares this view.

We are therefore, expecting the Governor to announce the release of some prisoners who have been granted pardon. To grant pardon is one of the best ways to exercise power. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that God's Omnipotence is mostly manifested when He forgives. Power is rightly exercised in granting forgiveness. It is easier to punish an offender than it is to forgive. The Devil can punish but he cannot forgive. We resemble God when we forgive. I want to thank the Governor in anticipation of the pardon he will hopefully grant to some of the prisoners. This will help to show that Mr. Governor has compassion and cares about the most forgotten of our society.

On our part, we the members of the society must also pledge that we are ready to ensure that the released prisoners are welcomed and reformed to be properly integrated into their families and society. We in the Catholic Church have already indicated to Edo State Government that we are ready to partner with them to establish a half way house where the released persons will be prepared to re-enter the society with lesser chances of committing crime again. There have been repeated cases of released prisoners going back to crime and sometimes it is because of the

low level of acceptance when they are freed. When they are not accepted, they go back to join friends who may have negative influence upon them. Let us learn to forgive and accept those who have been forgiven. This is the way to build a peaceful society. A society that does not give room for repentance is not a human society. Ours should be a truly human society. We must humanize our prisoners and those who have received freedom. No crime can wipe away our human dignity.

**6. Conclusion:** Dearly beloved in Christ, I am very happy to see so many of you today. To spend the first day of the year with prisoners is a good way to start the year. To bring so many gifts as you have done today is a good way to begin the year. I thank all of you for coming to celebrate with our brothers and sisters in this facility. I thank Very Rev Fr. David Ogun SJ, and his team who are constantly working with the prison authority. We are grateful to JDPC of the Archdiocese of Benin City for the work they are doing to ensure the release of some of the prisoners. They render free legal services to those detained and those who are sometimes not able to afford to pay their legal fee. I call on Catholic Lawyers Association to be engaged in assisting to take up cases on pro bono basis to help secure the freedom of some prisoners. Providing the best legal representation, we can give is a great act of mercy.

I am grateful to all the priests, consecrated men and women, the Laity, CMO, CWO, CYON and various lay apostolate groups who are here today. Your gifts are truly expression of your love for these our brothers and sisters. I urge you not to get tired of doing good. At the end of our life we shall be judged based on the good work we did or failed to do. As we celebrate the beginning of this New Year, I invoke the blessings of God upon you and your household, and upon all you do using those same words with which God commanded Moses to bless the people of Israel:

May the Lord bless you and Keep you.

May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace.

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.

Happy New Year to you all!