

**ARCHBISHOP AUGUSTINE OBIORA AKUBEZE HOMILY AT THE FINAL
PROFESSION OF TEN SISTERS OF MISSIONARY SISTERS OF DIVINE
MERCY, AT NNEWI, ON JANUARY 2019**

**THEME: RELIGIOUS LIFE AN INVITATION TO FOLLOW CHRIST MORE
CLOSELY**

1. INTRODUCTION/GREETINGS: Happy New Year to you all! Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ who has given us the gift of vocation to the religious life. We are also grateful to ten sisters who are making their final religious profession today. It is a day of joy. I greet the celebrants and their families that nurtured the vocation that has now blossom. We must also not forget to mention friends, spiritual directors who assisted the celebrants to reach this day. Many are called but only few are chosen. These ten sisters are among the few chosen. We congratulate the Missionary Sisters of Divine Mercy because it is a great day in the life of this religious institute. May the definitive incorporation of ten more sisters bring more genuine vocation to your institute. I am grateful to the Superior General and her Council for inviting me to preside at this Eucharistic celebration of the final profession of ten sisters of your institute.

I respectfully greet my dear brother bishop, Most Rev Dr Hilary Odili Okeke, the Bishop of Nnewi. As you know Bishop Hilary is one of the most brilliant canonists we have in Nigeria and without fear of contradiction, I dare to say one of the best in the world. My Lord, we thank you for what you have done for the Church in Nigeria and for what you are doing and will continue to do for the Church. May God bless you and the flocks entrusted to your care. To all the priests, consecrated men and women, family members and friends of the celebrants and the entire lay faithful I greet you all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. For all

government officials, politicians, traditional rulers and invited guests I salute you.

The religious profession of the ten sisters we have come to celebrate today is a special invitation from God to these candidates to be perfect as God is perfect. Religious life is a life of imitation of Christ. The Father of the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*, no. 47 reads: “Let each of the faithful called to the profession of the evangelical counsels, therefore, carefully see to it that he perseveres and ever grows in that vocation God has given him. Let him do this for the increased holiness of the Church, for the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity, which in and through Christ is the fount and the source of all holiness.” Your holiness of life contributes to the holiness of the Church. Your failure contributes to the failure of the Church. Once you put on your religious habit as a professed sister, your actions will affect peoples’ perception of the Church.

2. THE MISSIONARY SISTERS OF DIVINE MERCY: As a young Congregation founded 21 June 2003, I would want to encourage you to ensure that you build your Institute on sound catholic tradition. let your charism dictate your apostolate. Your charism as stated in your website is “CLOSER IMITATION OF THE MERCIFUL JESUS” (Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is Merciful; Lk. 6:36.) By this charism, all the members are committed to the promotion of Divine Mercy Cult and are called to be merciful, to model their life after that of the Merciful Jesus, offering unconditional love to every person without discrimination.” Your Institute was founded “to promote God's Merciful Love throughout the whole world and live out a life of Divine Mercy in various ways without discrimination.” If you truly live out this charism and purpose of your institute you can become a true witness of the mercy of Christ to

our society. Let your institute stand out in the area of diversity. Do not be focused only on admitting people from one area of the country. Seek vocation in every part of the country and the world. There is strength in diversity. Admission into the institute and calling candidates to vows, and assigning members to apostolate must be without discrimination as you have stated in your constitution. I say this not because I have any information that there is any discrimination among you. I say it to caution you ahead. Any religious institute in Nigeria that refuse to accept people from every tribe will find it difficult to grow. We must promote our diversity even in our religious institute. Sensitivity to feelings of others is essential in all your communities. Our country Nigeria needs witnesses to the power of diversity. The Synod Fathers in *Perfectae Caritatis* no, 3 underscores this when they taught: “The manner of living, praying and working should be suitably adapted everywhere, but especially in mission territories, to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members and also, as required by the nature of each institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances.” The demand of our society requires that our life style be a gospel message to our people that ethnic bigotry is completely unacceptable in the Church.

3. THE READINGS (FIRST READING ISAIAH 43:1-3; SECOND READING PHILIPPIANS 3: 8-14; GOSPEL READING MATTHEW 16:24-27): The Prophet Isaiah in the First reading tells the Israelites in exile not to be afraid. He expounds the reasons for this new courage that comes from above. He says, the Lord who created them knows them, has called them by name, and will provide the necessary protection for them when the serious time of trial comes. This reading is good to contemplate often because it offers us the reassurance that God is with us. It reminds us that trials are not signs of God’s abandonment. We worship God

Almighty who has not guarantee us a life free of trials. Our faith does not teach us that we will not face temptation but Christ assures us *Sed libera nos amalo*, but deliver us from every evil. Christ has not insulated us from encountering evil. No, He has only promised us that he will deliver us from every evil. Isaiah in the First reading also told the people that when they pass through water, or flame they will not be consumed. All of us will pass through water and flames but we will never be consumed because Isaiah tells us, "I will be with you."

For our ten sisters who are going to be finally professed today, as I congratulate you, I also want to let you know that final profession is not a vaccination against trial. It is not a guarantee against trial in religious life. It is not a ticket or a licence to do whatever you want. Like Isaiah tells us today, even after this final profession you still need to walk through water and flames. Water and flames are symbols of trials in this context. You will still face trials in your apostolate. You will still face trials in your community. You will still face trials coming from various areas in life. It may be health, it may come from family members that you are not able to assist, it may come from unfounded rumour that is spread concerning you, it may come from false perception of who you are by your superiors, it may come from alienation because of ethnicity, it may come from subtle denial of some of your rights. The trials hit more when it comes from within your religious family. But I tell, do not be afraid because the Lord says to you through the Prophet Isaiah, do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name.

In the Second Reading of today, Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians says he counts everything as loss because of Christ. He regards everything as rubbish. I have no doubt in my mind that the ten sisters making final profession today have left a lot of things behind. Some of

them may have left a promising professional career as a doctor, lawyer, Engineer, business entrepreneur, fame in the society etc. All of them have left the possibility of having their own children, enjoying the goods of marriage. They have left everything behind for the sake of following Christ. Dearly beloved sisters, we thank God for the definitive choice you are making today. Indeed, nothing can compare with the value of possessing Christ as your spouse forever. The rings that will be put in your fingers are symbols to the world that you are now definitively betrothed to Christ. You belong to Christ, your body, soul, mind, intellect, wealth, everything belongs to Christ.

In the second part of the letter, Saint Paul speaks of the need not to be presumptuous that we have already attained the goal. We must strive daily. No one attains perfection without striving. Saint Paul seems to give the formula to follow: “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13-14). You must learn to forget your mistakes in the past. Do not allow your mistakes in the past to define your future. You must keep focus on the heavenly goal. Your religious life is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. The end is to make heaven. The religious life you have chosen must be well lived so that you can make heaven. Just been a religious is not a ticket to heaven. It is what you do with your religious life that will lead you to heaven. Never forget why you are here on earth. God made us to know him, serve him in this life and to be happy with him forever in heaven. Saint Augustine of Hippo states and I quote:

You should always be unhappy with what you are, if you want to attain what you are not yet. For when you were content with yourself, you

stayed where you were, because if you say ‘Enough’, you are finished that very minute. Always grow, always walk on, always advance: do not stop on the way, do not turn back, do not go off course. One who does not advance is standing still; one who returns to the things he already abandoned is going backwards; one who goes off course commits apostasy. It is better to hobble along the road than run on any other route.” (St. Augustine, *Sermones*, 169, 18).

Religious life can be a very good way to heaven if you strive to observe the evangelical counsels of obedience, chastity, and poverty. If you see these as means to heaven you will strive to live them out. Today, the Church is accepting your total surrender of everything to God. Strive to ensure that your private life or your interior life has true connection to Christ. Never be a religious that only visit the chapel during communal prayer only. There are some priests and religious who never say any other prayers outside what is canonically required through the praying of the office of community prayer. It is good to fulfil these obligations but we must move beyond that. Seek private time with the Lord. Private visitation to the Blessed Sacrament should become a habit for each and everyone of us. It is important that we talk to Christ as a friend, and not just as a rescuer. It is true that Christ delivers us from evil, it is also true that Christ preserves us from entering into evil. We need both the graces of deliverance and the graces of preservation. With frequent closeness to Christ through the sacrament of the Eucharist and reconciliation we gradually press forward and never backward.

The Evangelist Matthew in today’s Gospel (16:24-27) recounts an essential criterion established by Christ for his disciples: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 2015 states: The

way of perfection passes by the way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living the peace and joy of the Beatitudes.” Dearly beloved in Christ, these words should take root in our hearts. If we want to seek perfection, we must make sacrifice. We must give up somethings that are attractive to us. We must give up the desire to satisfy our sensual pleasure. We must give up the desire to seek the praises of others. Must give up joining the company of those in our communities who gossip and spread falsehood. We must give up the attitude of unforgiving spirit. We must give up the desire to seek revenge. We must give up promotion of ethnic hegemony. We are not missionaries to entrench any particular ethnic group. We must give up old prejudices that pitch one group against the other.

4. CONCLUSION: As we celebrate with these sisters today, we must also pray for them and their Institute to grow from strength to strength. We must assist them both spiritually and materially. For the members of the Institute I urge you to continue to seek perfection of life. In doing this you must remember that you are missionaries.

You need to learn to seek the Will of God in the decisions of your superiors. This is the way you can be sure that you are walking along with God. As missionaries, you are sent. Avoid the temptation of influencing your assignment. If you send yourself, you are no longer a missionary. I like us to reflect on these beautiful words of Saint Teresa of Avila in his master piece, the Interior Castle. She says, and I quote: “it is presumptuous in me to wish to choose my path, because I cannot tell which path is best for me. I must leave it to the Lord, who knows me, to lead me by the path which is best for me, so that in all things His will may be done.”

Let us entrust the Missionary Sisters of Divine Mercy into the hands of our Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary will teach you how to show the face of mercy to the world because she was the first human being to behold the face of mercy. May God bless his word in our hearts and make them bear fruits through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Once again Happy New Year to you all!