

“Be imitators of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1)

Lenten Message of Archbishop Augustine Obiora Akubeze

2019

My dear priests, religious and lay faithful of the Archdiocese of Benin City,

1. We are opportune to witness yet another season of Lent, when we strive to follow the Lord in his temptation and in his fast. It is a season when the Blessed Mother calls us to her side to mourn with her awhile because Jesus our Lord is undergoing his passion for the salvation of all of humanity. The forty days of Lent mirrors the forty days our Blessed Lord spent in the desert and was tempted by the devil. It is a time for preparing catechumens who would be received into the Church at Easter through the sacraments of initiation. For those of us who have been baptized, it is a season when we journey with our brothers and sisters as they prepare to be received into the Church. During this holy season of grace, we who are baptized are once again called to renew our commitment to discipleship by examining how faithful we have been to our baptismal promises. In brief, Lent is a season of renewal set aside by the Church to help us prepare ourselves to hearken to the Lord’s summons, “Come, follow me” (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:16). This invitation given to the first disciples marks the beginning of a mission to which all of us who have become members of Christ’s body in baptism have been invited. We are called to be Christ’s disciples by imitation. We imitate Christ so that we can therefore invite others to come follow him. Our vocation is not for us to keep, but to share the good news with others so that they too might come to experience the joy of the gospel.

2. To follow Christ suggests that we pay close attention to how he lived his life so that we too may replicate that in our lives. Jesus was a man given to prayer. Scripture tells us he would go to a secluded place early in the morning to be in communion with his Father (cf. Luke 5:16), and late in the evening he would spend time again in prayer (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46). He would instruct his disciples to go to a private place to pray to our Father who sees, hears, and would reward whatever is done in secret (Matthew 6:6). Prayer was very central to his life and mission. There was no major event in his life that was not first brought to the Father in prayer. Before he selected his apostles, he prayed (Mark 3:13; Luke 6:12-13). Jesus would pray at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus. He concluded his earthly life with prayer on the cross (Luke 23:46). By his life, the Lord Jesus taught us the centrality and inevitability of prayer in the life of a Christian. Prayer is very essential if we must live true to our baptism. It is said, “a prayerless Christian is a powerless Christian.” If we do not pray we cannot establish that communion with the Father, which is necessary for our lives. To pray is to acknowledge that we are creatures dependent on our Creator. It is to establish our complete confidence in the one to whom our prayer is addressed. It is to recognize our limitation and to ask for divine support. To pray is to be in relationship with a God who loves us

enough to create us and hold us in existence. On the contrary, not to pray is to live without any ties to the transcendent and thus to live like orphans. Jesus showed us that prayer is not for the weak and faint-hearted, but for the strong and brave. It takes courage to pray, and only the courageous do it. That we pray is not to suggest that we leave everything to God; no, we do what we can, and let God do what we cannot. Prayer is a relationship; and like every relationship, it takes time. We have to persevere in prayer if we want to establish a rhythm. For prayer to be part of our lives, we must do it often – morning, afternoon, night. Praying from the heart is the best way to pray, because we communicate with the Lord from the depths of our being. While it is encouraged that we pray with guides such as prayer books, these are only to help us form appropriate words, which would now become ours as we pray to God. Therefore, we are not to feel we cannot pray without our prayer books. For those of us who are ordained, we have the mandatory prayer of the Church, which we are called to be faithful to. Laypersons are also encouraged to offer this prayer to sanctify the hours, and to pray for the universal Church.

3. Jesus was also a man of great mortification. The word “mortification” comes from the Latin, *mors* and *mortis*, which translate as “death.” Mortification, as it relates to our lives as Christians, refers to voluntary actions by which we gradually put to death all of our vices, sinful habits, and the self-centered tendencies that lurk beneath them. This is what it means to ‘deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23).’ Our Lord was particular about this deliberate act of dying to our sinful inclinations, because without this death to self, the new person cannot emerge. He says, “In truth I tell you, unless a wheat of grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest” (John 12:24). This teaching of Jesus on dying to self is one that tells us to think less of our interests, and ourselves and more of others. It is a teaching to shun self-centeredness in favor of altruism. According to this program of our Lord, it would be foolish to try to save our lives because we would lose it unless we spend ourselves in his service (Mark 8:35). Mortification is also at the heart of the practice of almsgiving. When we give alms, we deprive ourselves of something that rightfully belongs to us, and which we certainly need. We give alms from the best we have and not from what we have no need of. This way, we deny ourselves the pleasure that comes from holding on to those properties or belongings in order to put them at the service of someone else. A major practice during Lent is that of almsgiving. During this season, we are called to intensify our charity and to look out for our needy brothers and sisters. While almsgiving is always oriented outwards, it is also important to look at the inward dimension of almsgiving. To acknowledge that we have needs that could be met by others is not a demonstration of weakness. It is even courageous to receive alms from others, whom we judge that we are better than. I have seen persons who suddenly lose their wealth and are too ashamed or too proud to ask for help. Christianity calls us to humility and solidarity with all other human beings. Just as we help others we too must be open to receiving help from others.

4. Finally, the imitation of Christ entails following him in his fast. Jesus was a man given to much fasting. He began his public ministry by fasting for forty days and forty nights. This fasting was to pummel his body so that it did not control him but was put under the control of his spirit. To discipline our bodies is to not give in to every inclinations and impulses. As St. Paul tells us, 'the desires of the body are at odds with the desires of the spirit' (Galatians 5:17). In another place he warns us that to yield to the desires of the flesh and to live by them is death, but to yield to the desires of the spirit is life (Romans 8:13). Pope Benedict XVI explains the reason behind fasting as a pillar of Christian spirituality in his 2009 Lenten message. He writes, "Freely chosen detachment from the pleasure of food and other material goods helps the disciple of Christ to control the appetites of nature, weakened by original sin, whose negative effect impact the entire human person." Lent is a time to train our bodies to crave only for things that edify us. It involves sacrificing those things we like, but are not helpful in our spiritual journey. By making this sacrifice we indicate that we value our spiritual lives more than these things we give up during this Lent and after. It is my prayer that we may commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the disciplines of Lent – Prayer, Almsgiving and Fasting, and that this Lent would bear fruits in abundance to the glory of God and for the good of our souls.

Lenten Regulations 2019
Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City

To ensure a fruitful observance of this Holy Season of Lent in our Archdiocese, the following regulations apply:

- The Season of Lent is essentially penitential in nature. Liturgical celebrations must be conducted in such a fashion as to make the people appreciate the spirit of the season. Moderation should be exercised in preparation of churches for liturgical celebrations. Ostentatious decoration of the altar with flowers and ornaments must be avoided. The colour for the season remains purple or violet. Alleluia and the Gloria are forbidden during Lent. Also, the playing of musical instruments must be done with moderation, and with care to respect the nature of the season.
- Fasting, which is one of the most ancient practices of Lent, is not only about abstaining from food or drink; it also has some spiritual dimensions. It includes turning away from self, a turning towards God and a turning towards others in love. All Catholics are expected to fast and abstain from meat and food prepared with meat, especially on Ash Wednesday (March 6, 2019) and Good Friday (April 19, 2019). Abstinence from meat is also recommended on all Fridays throughout the year. The regulations governing abstinence from meat apply to all Catholics age fourteen (14) and older (Can. 1252). Adults who have completed their (18) year until the beginning of their sixtieth (60) year

are bound by the regulations that govern fasting. Pregnant women and sick people are excused from the regulations.

- Other Penitential acts and acts of sacrifice and self – denial, such as keeping away from sin, sinful environment and habits, the intensification of the fight against bribery and corruption are strongly recommended.
- Going to sacramental confession and doing appropriate penances both those imposed at confession and other voluntary acts of penance. The Code of Canon law (508 § 1) reserves the right to absolve reserved sins as well as *latae sententiae* censures which have not been declared and are not reserved to the Holy See to the competent ecclesiastical authority and to the canon penitentiary. In our archdiocese, the competent ecclesiastical authority is the Local Ordinary. He alone can absolve a penitent from guilt of such sins and from the censure of excommunication attached to abortion in sacramental confession. **Priests are reminded that the Holy Father has given to all priests the faculty to absolve from the censure of abortion in Sacramental Confession. However, the provisions of the Code of Canon Law on the Sacrament of Reconciliation should be adhered to (cf. *Misericordia et Misera*, 12).**
- Cutting down on ostentatious and lavish celebrations. Avoid unnecessary spending and even deny yourself legitimate things and save money for works of charity, especially contributing to the Lenten Fund. A person can give up drinking even soft drinks or watching favorite television programmes during the period of Lent. Those who are wedding during Lent are reminded of the penitential character of the season and are therefore urged to exercise moderation in their civic reception.
- Lenten Season is a time for solidarity with others in need. Our penance should flow into solidarity with others and generosity in everything especially in giving to the needy and contributing to the works of the Church. Charity, almsgiving, remission of debts should be practiced and voluntary donations should be freely made for the various projects of the Church.
- Attention to social justice, payment of just wages and prompt payment of debts. Avoidance of litigation and readiness to dialogue and reconciliation. Make peace in your family and community. Attention to the environment, engaging in communal work to keep the environment clean and healthy.
- Promotion of the Church's campaign in favour of life, especially right to life of the foetus, the sick and elderly.
- Work for the conversion of sinners and amendment of life of those living in sinful situations.

- Lenten period is a time for increased prayer, therefore, all the members of Christ's faithful are to:
 - Intensify their prayer life. This includes:
 - a. Fidelity to morning and night prayer as they wake up and as they end their day.
 - b. Daily Mass
 - c. Frequent confessions
 - d. Frequent and worthy reception of Holy Communion.
 - e. Daily family and individual Rosary
 - f. Regular meditative reading of the Holy Bible.
 - g. Fidelity to the Liturgy of the Hours especially for bishops, priests, deacons and religious
 - Observing the period of Easter Duty, by going to Confession and receiving Holy Communion at least once a year is from Easter Sunday (April 21, 2019) to Pentecost Sunday (June 9, 2019).
 - Visit the Blessed Sacrament and spend time with the Eucharistic Lord daily.
 - Take active part in the celebration of the Stations of the Cross in every Church on Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent.
 - Priests who celebrate the RCIA can administer the complete sacraments of Christian Initiation at Easter. Those of us who are baptized should intensify prayers for the catechumens who will be received into the family of God by baptism during Easter.

Note: A collection is to be made after the Stations of the Cross for the poor and for other social and charitable works of the Church. The collection is to be made after the 14th Station before the prayer before the altar and conclusion. On Good Friday, special collection is taken up for the maintenance of the Holy Places in Jerusalem.

Cathedraticum will be had in each deanery on particular dates. Cathedraticum is the occasion of showing a Catholic's love for and loyalty to the Archbishop of the archdiocese as the Father and Elder. It is a sort of tribute. All Catholic groups, including priests, every parish, station, every Catholic family, every statutory organization, every association in the Church, and every religious community are expected to give the Archbishop a present in cash and/or kind to demonstrate their filial love for him and to contribute to his work as Shepherd of your souls. All is expected to be generous. The dates are as follows:

Monday, April 1, 2019

Iguobazuwa Deanery at St. Andrew's Parish, Iguobazuwa at 10.am.

Tuesday, April 2, 2019

**Abudu Deanery at St. Thomas Aquinas
Parish, Abudu at 10.am.**

Thursday, April 15, 2019

**Benin City Deanery at Holy Cross
Cathedral, Benin City at 10.am.**

- For this year, the celebration of Chrism Mass will be on Thursday, April 18, 2019 at the Holy Cross Cathedral, Benin City for the whole Archdiocese. There will be No Cathedraticum on that day. All priests living and working in the Archdiocese are to come for Chrism Mass in order to express the unity of the *presbyterium* and for the renewal of their Priestly commitment.

May the Virgin Mary, mother of sorrows, accompany us in our Lenten journey and support us with her prayers as we strive to draw closer to our suffering Lord. I hereby call on all to make the most of this Holy Season and to acquire all the graces they can before the season comes to an end.

Given in Benin City this 6th day of March 2019.

+Augustine O. AKUBEZE
Archbishop of Benin City