



Features: Ogoja Episcopal Ordination Homily

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OGOJA, NIGERIA -

EPISCOPAL ORDINATION: BISHOP DONATUS AKPAN

Ogoja, July 7th, 2017.

Homily by John Cardinal ONAIYEKAN, Archbishop of Abuja.

“How can we repay the lord for his goodness to us?

We shall lift up the cup of salvation

and call on the name of the Lord” Psalm 116

1. Here we have come again, from far and near, for the ordination and installation of a new bishop for the diocese of Ogoja, one of the oldest Catholic jurisdictions of Nigeria.

This is the fourth in the line of shepherds of God's flock here, after the ancestor Bishop Thomas McGettrick, the Elder Joseph Ukpo, and the latest, John Ayah. It is an occasion of great blessings and joy for the entire family of God of Ogoja, priests, religious and lay faithful. It is almost three years since your beloved last bishop, John Ayah, was taken away from you, just when he was about settling down to a regular pace of mission after less than 8 years of hard work, building on the solid foundation laid by his two predecessors. After his transfer to Uyo, Bishop Ayah has continued to supervise the pastoral affairs of this diocese - along with his new assignment in Uyo, several hours away on pretty bad roads. Dear Bishop John, we join the faithful of Ogoja in thanking you for your dedicated service of your dear people of Ogoja. As you now breathe a sigh of relief, be assured that the Lord will bless you most abundantly for all you have accomplished in his service here in Ogoja.

2. We commend and congratulate the faithful of Ogoja for their patience and trust in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, to provide a suitable pastor for them in his good time. We congratulate especially the priests of the diocese, who in this delicate period of waiting have demonstrated an admirable good sense of the Church, *sensus ecclesiae*, waiting for and accepting the will of God, made known through the decision of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, the Vicar of Christ on earth. This is as it should be. This is the way to ensure continued peace, unity and progress in the diocese. May the blessings of the Lord be with you all Amen.

3. In the center of today's events is the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd. But there is also a human being at the centre of these happenings; a humble, gentle servant of God, **Donatus Edet Akpan**. I know him very well, and I know that he is thoroughly overwhelmed by all that is happening around him. This is only natural, considering the awesome responsibility that goes with the episcopal office. He has not hidden

his lowly origins – as he has published in his brief biography in the brochure. He has also selected very significant biblical passages for the Liturgy of the Word at this mass.

On the one hand, he stresses that all this comes from the mercy and love of God, who freely distributes his graces as he wills. “The Lord called me from the womb”. This is a journey that started long ago, guided by the loving hands of the Lord God. This is just as Jesus Himself declared in the Gospel reading:

“You did not choose me, But I chose you - and appointed you, That you should go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

On the other hand, he emphasizes the fact that the Call of God is for service.

“The Lord formed me from the womb to be his servant”. “The Lord said to me: ‘You are my servant in whom I will be glorified”

4. Our new Bishop has put the great Apostle Paul as his model. Since he has received the episcopal ministry by the mercy of God, he does not loose heart. But he recognizes that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us”. For this reason, “what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” Note that Paul is servant not only of Jesus Christ the Lord, but also of the people he ministers to for the sake of Jesus.

With the Psalmist, our new bishop proclaims:

“Your servant Lord, Your servant I am. I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.

5. My dear brothers and sisters, we now live in a social environment where leadership is seen and exercised largely in form of exerting authority and power over the people. Leadership is considered a license to live big at the expense of the poor masses.

Unfortunately, some people see the bishop in this way; as the big man of honour, wielding power and authority at will and enjoying high level of comfort. Perhaps this is why some people are fighting bitterly over who should be a bishop in their diocese. But Jesus has clearly warned us against allowing ourselves to be infected by this pernicious virus. We all remember his powerful words on leadership with service:

“You know that among the gentiles, those they call their rulers lord it over them. Among you, this is not to happen”.

The example is none other than Christ himself:

“For the Son of Man himself came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”. Matt 10: 41-45.

Dear brothers and sisters, please pray for your bishops - and for your priests too - that we may be leaders in the Church of God after the heart and mind of Christ. The example of the Apostles whose successors we bishops claim to be, is frightfully instructive. Like Jesus, they all ended their lives in Martyrdom, except John the Beloved, and even he was spared only by the plan of God. We should remember that in the early centuries, to be elected Pope was a clear death sentence for the next wave of persecution. The Bishop of Rome was targeted as the “ring leader” of the group forbidden by law. Our times are different and less cruel. But the strong words of Jesus who “came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many”, must keep ringing in our hearts and minds.

6. My dear brother, Donatus, you are starting your episcopal ministry in an environment in which religion has been given a very bad name. Fanatics peddle errors for truth and attributing them to the all Holy God. This is how people commit crimes including killing innocent persons in the name of God. There can be no excuse for this. Our recent Popes are well on record as saying that “It is blasphemy to kill in the name of God”. Opportunists are manipulating religion for ulterior selfish motives - for political power game - or for sheer desire for material wealth. This is how religion is often devoid of its innate power to

promote peace, built upon justice and honesty. Is it not a tragic contradiction that our nation has in the past decade been bedeviled with rampant insecurity and endemic corruption even as external manifestation of religion grows in scope and intensity? On this, both our major religions, Christianity and Islam, have a serious examination of conscience to make. We have reached a stage when titles like “Man of God”, cleric, or “religious leader” no longer evoke respectability, dignity and honesty.

7. Religion is itself a great asset in a nation. And so it must be also in our nation. But it will not play its positive role if we do not work hard at liberating it from those holding it hostage in whatever way. We who call ourselves religious leaders have to be vigilant lest we allow ourselves to play into the hands of people with no concern for God. If we are to sincerely lead people to God, the Almighty and merciful Father, we need to seek and discover the many spiritual values that we share. It is with such common values that we can join hands to address the many evils which afflict us in this nation, irrespective of faith or ethnic belonging. We have to move from sterile rivalries to fruitful cooperation and collaboration.

8. Our primary task as bishops is to coordinate and promote the evangelizing mission of the church entrusted to our care. Evangelization, spreading the good news, does entail, but goes beyond making converts and swelling the statistics of our church membership. We must also endeavor to generate a critical mass of witnesses to truth, justice and love, who, in collaboration with other men and women of good will, can make a positive impact on our society. This is what promoting the kingdom of God means. The Lord will judge the success of our mission, not primarily on the quantity and numbers of our membership, nor the splendor of our physical structures, but most importantly by the quality of faith and witness of our people. This, of course, calls for a constant assessment and reassessment of our pastoral plans and targets. May the Lord guide us as we seek to do his will. Amen.

9. But I must repeat and stress, lest I be misunderstood especially by my friends in the media, that our evangelizing mission does indeed entail our doing our best to propagate openly the Gospel of Jesus, and to welcome all who freely accept faith in Jesus. This is not only a mandate from our Lord, but also our right under the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is in this light that I do not hesitate to declare that it is my desire to “Christianize Nigeria” with all means of peaceful persuasion and conviction. But I am also aware that there are others who have a similar desire, in respect of their own faith. I therefore respect the right of those who claim that they want to “Islamize Nigeria.” We are therefore engaged in a contest for the souls of Nigerians - a contest that is legitimate, but must be carried out strictly with the rules of non-violence, justice, freedom and sincerity before God. This is not only possible, but necessary, for peace to reign in our land.

10. Peace! Yes, peace is a great blessing and gift of God for which we must pray. Only God can guarantee peace. As the psalmist reminds us: “Unless the Lord watches the city, the guards keep awake in vain”. But we must also work hard for it, through the promotion of justice and solidarity in the society. We also need to strive to preserve the measure of peace that we already enjoy, which we should not take for granted. We only need to think about those nations making front page news in the world media with horrible pictures of chaos and massive destruction to realize that we must be grateful to God for his goodness.

11. The situation of things in Nigeria is not perfect. We all know that. Many people are angry, unhappy and hurting. Their grievances must be noted and addressed. But before we decide to scatter ourselves into small pieces, let us carefully calculate the full implications of such a process, especially on the poor masses. Our experience of the past has shown that when things fall apart, and there is generalized

chaos and destruction, many of those now making loud noises about our going our separate ways, will be the first to pick up their spare passports and run away with their families. Only the poor and helpless will be left to bear the brunt of the crisis. Therefore, let us be patient with ourselves, and work for unity and peace, built on justice and solidarity. May God grant us peace, and make us instruments of his grace of peace on our land. Amen.

12. In conclusion, may I be permitted to deliver a message of gratitude on behalf of myself and the Archdiocese of Abuja, to Fr. Donatus Akpan, for the great pastoral work he has accomplished among us these past 28 years. Father Akpan, we accompany you with our sincere love and fervent prayers. May the Lord continue to give success to the works of your hands, as you arrive in Ogoja, not after lobbying or struggling, but in answer to Gods call to serve. May our Blessed Mother Mary, to whom you have a very deep devotion, support you with her powerful intercession.

Ad Multos annos.