



CONTEST FOR SOULS OF NIGERIANS, A LEGITIMATE APOSTOLATE - Cardinal Onaiyekan

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OGOJA, NIGERIA -

Christians in Nigeria have been challenged to be more proactive in the promotion of the Christian Religion, instead of engaging in unnecessary argument about the plan to Islamise Nigeria. The call was made by the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, John Cardinal Onaiyekan, during his homily at the Episcopal Ordination Mass and installation of Monsignor Donatus Akpan as the new Catholic Bishop of Ogoja Diocese.

The ceremony which took place at St Benedict Cathedral, Ogoja, Cross Rivers State, was attended by members of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN).

The delegation of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), which included Rev. Fr. Ojaje Idoko, the Pastoral Affairs Department Director was led by the Secretary General, Rev. Fr. Ralph Madu.

According to the Cardinal, the mandate from Christ is not only to propagate the Good News but also to win converts through peaceful persuasion and conviction. His words: "... 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.”

He continued: “It is in this light that I do not hesitate to declare that it is my desire to “Christianize Nigeria” by 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 “Islamise 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 also necessary, for peace to reign in our land.”

The Local ordinary of Abuja Archdiocese outlined the primary responsibility of the position of a chief shepherd by stating that it is to coordinate and promote the evangelizing mission of the Church entrusted to his care. He continued: “Evangelization, spreading the good news, does entail, but goes beyond making converts and swelling the statistics of our church membership. We must also endeavour 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 in our society.”

Cardinal Onaiyekan when stating that this is what promoting the kingdom of God means added: “The Lord will judge the success of our mission, not primarily on the quantity and numbers of our membership, or the splendour 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.”

The homilist, while congratulating the priests and lay faithful of the diocese for their “patience and trust in Christ who has given them a chief shepherd in his good time”; pointed out that the country is in a social environment where leadership is seen and exercised largely in form of exerting authority and power over the people; adding: “Leadership is considered a license to live big at the expense of the poor masses.” He however declared that the Bishop is not of this leadership status. He called on Catholic lay faithful to pray for their bishops and the priests so

that they can discharge their vocation in accordance with God's discernment.

The ceremony was attended by dignitaries from all walks of life, government functionaries and traditional rulers. Also present were priests, religious and lay faithful from all parts of the country, worthy of note was a delegation of the Archdiocese of Abuja, where the new Bishop worked as a parish priest before his appointment by the Holy Father, Pope Francis.