



## **RELIGION, A GREAT ASSET TO ANY NATION**

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### **OGOJA, NIGERIA -**

The Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, John Cardinal Oniyekan has described Religion as a great asset in the life of any nation. He, however, warned that for religion to have positive impact in the Nigerian nation, Religious leaders and the faithful must work hard to prevent it from being held hostage in whatever way.

The Cardinal made this assertion in his homily at the Episcopal Ordination Mass of Monsignor Donatus Akpan as the new 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 local ordinary of the Abuja Archdiocese declared: "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." He continued: "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."

The Cardinal emphasized: "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. He therefore called on religious leaders in the country "to move from sterile rivalries to fruitful cooperation and collaboration", in order to achieve the desired

positive result.

The homilist alerted the new bishop that he was starting his Episcopal ministry in an environment which religion has been given a very bad name. “Fanatics peddle errors for truth and attributing them to the all Holy God,” he said. He continued: “This is how people commit crimes including killing innocent persons in the name of God. There can be no excuse for this”.

Cardinal Onaiyekan noted that 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,” he declared. He asked; “Is it not a tragic contradiction that our nation has in the past decade been be devilled with rampant insecurity and endemic corruption even as external manifestation of religion grows in scope and intensity?

The Cardinal, therefore, noted that the country’s two 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,” he said.

Speaking on the Nigerian situation, Cardinal Onaiyekan also used the occasion to call on those agitating for the fragmentation of the country to stop their agitation. His words: “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.

The Cardinal continued: “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.”

He concluded: “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.”

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. There were 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, with a strong delegation from the Archdiocese of Abuja, where the new Bishop worked as a parish priest before his appointment by the Holy Father, Pope Francis.