



CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF ARCHBISHOP AUGUSTINE OBIORA AKUBEZE, THE PRESIDENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, TO ALL NIGERIANS

Dec 19, 2018

ABUJA, NIGERIA -

Fellow Nigerians,

THEME: 2019, A YEAR OF FULFILMENT OF THE HOPE OF NIGERIANS

On behalf of the members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, I send you special Christmas greetings. As we draw closer to the end of the year, we need to thank God for his goodness to us in Nigeria. God has been kind to us. If not for God, our condition in Nigeria would have been worse. Some people may question why we are celebrating Christmas season when there are still many things wrong with Nigeria. Some have argued that we are grappling with political tension. We have been witnessing slow growth of the economy and the higher increase of unemployment of youths. We are witnessing significant challenges in our educational sector; the increase in poverty of our people; the insecurity of lives and property and the invasion of some of the farm lands of our people by some armed herdsmen who think it is their right to lead their cows to graze on the crops of others. Many Nigerians both Christians and Muslims have condemned the invasion of innocent people's farmlands by herdsmen.

Some of our people have questioned what is the need to celebrate when some of our priests, consecrated men and women are kidnapped while going about their pastoral work? A significant number of our lay faithful have also been victims of these crimes. Sadly, though, some have lost their lives during this terrible ordeal which is becoming too frequent in Nigeria. How do we celebrate Christ the King of Peace when some of our brothers and sisters in Northern Nigeria and, especially in the North Eastern part are constantly being attacked unprovoked? How do we celebrate when we have witnessed many mass burials of our people killed by Islamic fundamentalists? How do we celebrate when our Churches and Mosques come under attack; and soldiers are being killed? How do we celebrate under these conditions?

Dear people of good will, I call on all Nigerians to celebrate in spite of all these challenges. We celebrate because we do not place our hopes in mere mortals. Ours is not going to come from our politicians. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth (Psalm 124:8). Our help is in God through whom nothing is impossible. In the Gospel of Matthew 26:19 we read: "But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." Yes, we must learn to trust in Christ to help us confront our challenges. This is why we call on all Nigerians to continue to say the prayer for Nigeria in distress. Let all Nigerians cry to God to transform Nigeria into a land where opportunities are actualized and where there is harmony and peace.

Dear people of God, we hope in a better future for Nigeria in 2019 because we know that we have re-consecrated Nigeria into the hands of our Lady of Fatima who is the Queen of Nigeria on 13 October 2017 in Benin City. Mary's closeness to Nigeria will help us to do whatever Christ asked us to do. It is in doing what Christ has asked us to do that we can transform Nigeria from a land of misery to a land of prosperity. A land free of corruption, a country where her sons and daughters will no longer seek false greener pastures abroad and perish in the Mediterranean Sea or be treated with less human dignity when they are trafficked for economic and sexual exploitation.

We hope for a Nigeria where our leaders will bring the dividends of democracy to all Nigeria irrespective of whether they voted for them or not. This is so because every Nigerian tax payers' money is used to fund Government irrespective of whether the Nigerian voted for the leader or not. We hope for a Nigeria where politicians will no longer seek prophetic prediction of their political futures from priests and other pastors. Our politicians should seek prayers from priests and pastors to get the grace to fulfil their electoral promises to the electorate. They should win the hearts of Nigerians through meaningful and substantial campaign rooted in realistic promises that will better the lives of Nigerians.

As this year comes to an end, we look forward to next year with hope. We look forward to a peaceful election. We look forward to an election where every vote will count. We look forward to an election where Nigerians will come out and vote based on their conviction and not based on sentiments or acceptance of propaganda. We look forward with hope to next year, a year when Nigerians will judge the quality of the candidates for political offices by their track records and not vote based on declaration of prophecy by men of God. Our politicians should know that their obligation is towards the electorate, the Nigerian people. Politicians must avoid going to seek the outcome of election from priests and pastors. They should go on campaign and let the Nigerian people know what they are capable of delivering. When politicians go to the Church, they should seek prayers from the priests and men of God to help them fulfil political manifestoes that will bring peace, justice and prosperity to all Nigerians. The pulpit is not the place to insult or praise politicians. The Church must remain non-partisan. We must not be involved in partisan politics. It does not help the Church nor does it help our society when men of God begin to endorse or reject political candidates. We in the Catholic Church, denounce anyone who uses the Church or sanctuary to make political prophecy or to endorse candidates for political offices.

In other countries, politicians look at opinion polls to recalibrate their message. It is unfortunate, that some people in the Church are using the Church for political pronouncements. The pulpit is meant for the proclamation of the message brought to us by the infant Jesus. Christ himself avoided getting into secular politics. My kingdom is not of this world, he told Pilate (John 18:36). If Christ recused himself from politics, those who speak for Christ, priests, and pastors must do the same. We must remember that we have Christ's faithful in our places of worship who belong to various political parties. No religious body should set out solely to promote political agenda. It is true that we must educate our people to vote for candidates who will promote religious freedom in every part of the country. We must educate our people to avoid turning politics to a theocracy; we are a democracy. Democracy allows for people of every faith to vie for offices and to be judged based on merit. The electorate make the determination of who to rule them.

In conclusion, I call on all Nigerians to learn to share the peace and love that Christ brought us with his birth. The birth of Christ offers us the opportunity to share together our common humanity. We in Nigeria must embrace the peace proclaimed by Christ. Let us share love and eschew bitterness. May God bless Nigeria and prosper our land. Amen.

Merry Christmas to all Nigerians!