

“WHAT YOU HAVE COME TO IS MOUNT ZION, THE CITY OF THE LIVING GOD” (Heb 12:21)

Homily of His Lordship, Most Rev. Peter Ebere Okpaleke, Bishop of Ekwulobia, at the Meeting with Consecrated Persons on February 4, 2021 at the St. Joseph’s Cathedral Ekwulobia

1. Preamble – The Day of Consecrated Life

It is with joy that I celebrate with you, Rev. and dear Frs., Brothers and Sisters, the Day of Consecrated Life in Ekwulobia Diocese.

As we know, the Day of Consecrated Life is usually celebrated on February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord. Because February 2, this year fell on a Tuesday, when the Bishop’s Office is open to the lay faithful, I decided to shift the celebration, for two reasons. First, it is easier to reschedule our celebration than to cancel the office day. It took only the mindfulness to include the change in the diary/directory and to send a circular to that effect. Second and more importantly, the lay faithful *bu ndi anyi na-agbara odibo*. Ministerial priests are ordained to serve the lay faithful in the name and person of Jesus Christ the good shepherd as the path through which they work out their own salvation in fear and trembling (Phil 2:12). The more I reflect on it, the clearer it becomes to me that in analogy to what obtains in the world of football where you have Chelsea, Ifeanyi Ubah FC, Enyimba, Rangers, Man U, etc., the lay faithful are like individual players in the Jesus Team. The priests are like coaches. Recently, the Head Coach of Chelsea Football Club, Frank Lampard was relieved of his duties because of the poor performance of the team. This reminded me in a hard way that as we, priests, as coaches, share responsibility, however this can be calibrated, for the failure of any member of the Jesus Team. Recall the grounds why the faithful are exhorted to obey their leaders. In the Letter to the Hebrews 13: 17, we read: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority, for they keep watch over your souls and are accountable for them”. Surely, we do. We keep watch over the souls of the faithful entrusted to our care and are accountable for them. But while we may not run the risk of losing our jobs in the near future, although sad events in history such as the French Revolution should teach us otherwise, we are still accountable before God. I have gone into all these details to encourage us to be steadfast in our commitment to the ministry we have received from the Lord and serve as worthy ambassadors of His (2 Cor 5:18-20).

As consecrated persons, we are reminded that we are ambassadors *extraordinaire*. This comes out clearly in the message of Pope St. John Paul II in the first World Day of Consecrated Life in 1997. In this message, the saintly pope highlighted the core identity of consecrated persons in the life of the Church. He gave three reasons for the institution of the Day for Consecrated Life and why February 2, the Feast of Presentation was chosen for the celebration.

Pope St. John Paul II started by reminding consecrated persons that the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element of her mission. This is so because, the Holy Father continued, quoting number 3 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, the consecrated life “manifests ‘the inner nature of the Christian calling’ and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse.” I remember drawing your attention to these condensed and powerful synthesis of the mission of consecrated persons in the Church in my address to you titled, “It is Good that We are Here (Matt 17:4),” on our first meeting as Consecrated Persons in Ekwulobia Diocese on May 30, 2020.

Pope St. John Paul II gave three reasons for the institution of the day for consecrated life. According to him, the first reason is thanksgiving. By becoming consecrated men and women, you responded to a call. Understandably, there has to be a call first before the response. There is therefore the priority of God’s action. For this, one must thank God. It is against that background that one can ask with St. Theresa of Avila, "what would become of the world if there were no religious?" (Autobiography, ch. 32, n. 11). What would become of the world if there were none privileged by God to mirror the total self-gift that is at the heart of the Christian calling. This is a reason for thanksgiving as well as renewed commitment to one’s holy vocation.

The second reason for the institution of the day for consecrated life, according to the Holy Father, is to promote knowledge of and esteem for the consecrated life among the entire people of God. In as much as vocation to religious life is flourishing in our part of the world, it is still important to promote this knowledge of the mystery of the consecrated life and to preserve it from corruption. Consecrated life is not a call to belong to an elite group of Christians entitled to recognition and support of the Christian community while shielded from the responsibilities of becoming parents and other distractions of everyday

life. Rather, consecrated life is at the service of the baptismal consecration of all the faithful. We are consecrated at baptism so that we can in our different walks of life live in total self-giving to God in imitation of Jesus the supreme consecrated one sent by the Father. This internal relationship between the special consecration and the baptismal consecration needs to be more clearly highlighted. **In the light of this, I challenge your association here in Ekwulobia Diocese to come up with proposals on how best to project this internal relationship between the two forms of consecration, so that it can become clearer to the faithful how baptismal consecration tends towards special consecration and how the later remains a remainder of the perfection that is expected of all (Matt 5:48).** What is clear to me is that this will not be addressed by simply inviting the lay faithful to the celebration of the day of consecrated life. So, I am hoping to get well thought-out responses from your Association to this aspect of the celebration of the day of consecrated life.

The third reason given by Pope St. John Paul II for the celebration pertains to the consecrated persons themselves. According to him, consecrated persons will be helped by the celebration of this annual World Day to return to the sources of their vocation, to take stock of their own lives, to confirm the commitment of their own consecration. In this way, they will be able to give witness with joy to the men and women of our time, in diverse situations, that the Lord is the Love who is able to fill the heart of the human person. That is why **we have gathered today so that you can draw strength from each other and from the Lord to continue in the witness of your lives.**

Finally, Pope St. John Paul II explained the decision to link the day for consecrated life to the feast of the presentation of the Lord. According to him, “the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple is an eloquent icon of the total offering of one's life for all those who are called to show forth in the Church and in the world, by means of the evangelical counsels ‘the characteristic features of Jesus -- the chaste, poor and obedient one’.”

As you can see, my dear brothers and sisters, at the heart of the celebration of the day of consecrated life is total self-giving in imitation of Jesus Christ the supreme consecrated person. As consecrated persons you are called to witness to this total self-giving by embodying in yourselves the life of Christ so much so that you become in an extended sense, the Word of God made flesh.

2. What you have come to is Mount Zion

Although the readings we have heard are those of the day, they have rich lessons for us consecrated persons. The first reading reminds us of who we are in the Lord: people of the new covenant, those who by God's grace have been brought from Mount Sinai to Mount Zion, where everyone is firstborn citizen.

To understand the power of this contrast between the new and the old covenant it is important to place the Letter to the Hebrews within the context of the first century audience it was addressed. From all indications, the Letter was addressed to Jewish converts to Christianity in the first century. The writer consistently contrasts their situation as Jews, that is, as beneficiaries of the first covenant at Sinai with the surpassing greatness of the new covenant, made possible by Jesus, the ideal high priest. The author sets up this contrast right from the beginning of the Letter. He drew a sharp contrast between the times of the ancestors of those Jewish converts, when God spoke through prophets and the times of those Jewish converts, when God has spoken through God's son (Heb 1:1). He was effectively saying to those converts: look, you are better off!; your fathers however great their relationship with God, were groping in darkness when compared with your situation. Then they had Moses and the prophets. But these were men although graced by God. But now, in your own times, the sun of righteousness and Son of God, higher than the angels and the radiant glory of God, has through the mystery of his life, death and resurrection effected something definitive, new and different in history. You are the beneficiaries of this new covenant. Going back to the old covenant is like *mmadu i hapu ebe a na-echi ozo, jewe ebe a na-alu agwu*; like someone moving from a higher and better position to a lower and worse position.

The context of writing of this Letter to the Hebrew clarifies its rhetorics, that is, what the Letter set out to do. As we know, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans. There are allusions to temple worship in the Letter. For example, in Heb 9:7ff, it is indicated that the high priest enters the second tent once a year, taking in blood with which to make a sacrifice for his own and people's sin. Now Christ has come and has entered the sanctuary, once for all, taking with him, not the blood of goats but his own blood, having won an eternal redemption. From this passage, one can conclude that the audience were conversant with temple worship and that at the time of writing, temple worship

was ongoing. This leads us to conclude that the Letter was written earlier than 70 AD.

Historically, it is known that the destruction of Temple was preceded by years of mounting Jewish nationalism and messianism. From the Acts of the Apostles (18:2), we know that Emperor Claudius who was emperor between 41-53 AD expelled all the Jews from Rome because of public disturbances stirred by claims of different persons to be the expected Messiah. Gamaliel mentioned Theudas and Judas the Galilean in Acts 5:36. This means that among first century Jews, the burning question was not whether a messiah was on the way but who among the many claimants was the messiah and which of the various things offered by these claimants represented the content of true messianic promise. Thus against majority opinion about the messiah coming to liberate the Jews from bondage to the Romans, the Letter to the Hebrews offered a vision of a different and more fundamental kind of liberation. Compared to the overthrow of the Romans, this liberation could not be verified by the senses. In the first reading, (Heb 12:18) we heard that what we have come to is nothing known to the senses, not a blazing fire or trumpet blast which made everyone that heard it beg that no more should be said to them. But it is still a reality of faith. That is why in Hebrew 11, faith is described as that which proves the existence of realities that are unseen and guarantees the blessings hoped for. It is in faith that the audience is called in the section of the Letter read to us today, to know that they have come to mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where the millions of angels are gathered for the festival, with the whole Church of first-born sons and daughters, enrolled as citizens of heaven. In sum, they have come to God Himself, the supreme Judge and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant and to purifying blood which pleads more insistently than Abel's.

In effect, the new covenant promised liberation not from the Romans but transformation of relationships with God, with heavenly beings and with one another. The new relation would transform belongingness and citizenship from an earthly to a heavenly realm. That is why it speaks of citizens of heaven who have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, where the millions of angels are gathered for a festival with the whole Church of first-born sons and daughters. In the face of the grandeur of what they have been called to, the early Christians of Jewish origin were challenged to celebrate their faith and remain steadfast in the bosom of the Church. For us reading the Letter to the Hebrews centuries after they were

written, we are challenged to appreciate the mystery of what we have been called to and where we are. We have been called to Mount Zion, the city of the living God. We have come to God. This is the truth that is presumed by our vocation as consecrated persons. But in reality we know that it is sometimes the case that we do not realize fully who we are or what we are called to be and to do. Put simply, the Letter to the Hebrews is reminding us that we are called to relationship with God and with one another.

On another note, the Letter is also challenging us as it did the first century Christians who were torn between following Christ and joining in the struggle for emancipation from Roman rule, to make a choice for Christ and to stick to our choice. Then as today, there are many options, distractions and seduction. Then, there were no internets, cable TV with 24 hour broadcast and entertainment, no football matches and Nollywood. Today, we contend with these. Without taking us away from Christ, these can distract and qualify our discipleship. They sometimes seduce us to a less authentic life proposing and getting us to be addicted to less wholesome ideas, attitudes and lifestyles. Let us be more concrete. As consecrated persons, life in community is one way of witnessing to that transformed relationship that is supposed to reign in the heavenly Jerusalem. But the cell phone and the availability of cheap calls has made it possible for people to invest less and less time with those in their immediate surrounding or members of their community. They could be in place A and be connected not with those in place A but in those in place B, thousands of kilometers away. Thus, without being enemies, they end up being co-tenants and not community members. This detracts from the quality of the witness of life that we are called to give.

Another challenge is with regard to poverty. We have a lot to learn about this from the former president of Uruguay, Jose Mujica, (2010-2015) regarded as the world's poorest president. As president he refused to live in the presidential palace but in the one bedroom apartment he had lived for 35 years with his wife without any guards or servants. He owned one Volkswagen Beatles car and donated 90% of his salary to charity. Asked to comment on the fact that he was being described as the poorest president, said that one is indeed poor who needs more than he or she has. In this sense, one may have accumulated fortunes but may remain poor if he or she is not contented. He described himself as frugal because he has learnt to live on little. In other words, this atheist who spent 14 years in prison, seven of which was in solitary confinement and two of the seven

years at the bottom of a dry well, is teaching us frugality and self-contentment. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that encourages conspicuous consumption. For priests, people sometimes measure their attainment by the type of car they use; the type of telephone they carry, the shoes and eye-glasses they wear. Some of us insist on buying designer products, etc. What is worse is that the spirit of sacrifice is dying fast. For many people, the primary consideration for doing anything is what they would gain. Yet, we profess to follow Jesus, the supreme consecrated person who is poor, chaste and obedient. As we celebrate the Day for consecrated life, let us review our commitment to who we are. Let us remember that we have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God; we have come to God the supreme judge.

3. Called to be Missionaries: Concluding Reflection

Finally, let us remember that we are not consecrated persons for ourselves. We are consecrated for service in the Church. Providentially, the gospel today is about the mission of the twelve. Jesus sent them out in pairs (that is, as community); gave them authority over unclean spirits, and instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff, to wear their sandals but not to take a spare shirt. We may not take this literally. But it is surely a challenge to us to rely totally on God and to be frugal, contented and focused on spreading the Good News. Let me repeat: our being consecrated persons is for a mission. Consecration is not an end in itself. It is for a purpose: mission – bearing witness to Jesus Christ – who has called us and sent us to be a sign to the world that there are more basic and lasting values in life than accumulation of wealth, power, and search for security. In our lives, we have found security in God. We are supposed to have left everything and followed Jesus. As we celebrate the Day of consecrated life, let us give thanks to God for our vocation, let us appreciate what God has done for us by calling us into intimate relationship with Him in the Church. Let us renew our strength and commitment to continue to bear witness to Christ fully aware that we may be the only Gospel that some people may get to read.

God bless you!



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