

## **HOMILY AT THE INSTALLATION OF MOST REV. PETER EBERE OKPALEKE, BISHOP OF EKWULOBIA APRIL 29, 2020 BY MOST REV. VALERIAN M. OKEKE**

*“I have loved you as the father has loved me” (Jn. 15: 9ff)*

### **GREETINGS AND REMARKS**

Today, still in the joy of Easter Season we have gathered to celebrate this historic event long desired: the erection of the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia and the installation of her first diocesan Bishop, Most Rev. Peter Ebere Okpaleke. According to Church law (Canon law) a Bishop may not assume the duties of his office until he takes what is called canonical possession. The Papal Bull that has just been shown and read to us as conveyed through the Apostolic Nuncio, His Excellency, Archbishop Antonio Guido Filipazzi, is the official mandate to conduct this liturgical function. It is an ancient tradition of the Church that expresses the bond of unity of the local Church to the universal Church, headed by the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. This Apostolic letter comes from the successor of St. Peter. The disciple to whom Jesus said “you are the rock and, on this rock, I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18)

It is my joy to perform this assignment on behalf of the Holy Father Pope Francis and our Apostolic Nuncio. I feel honoured and grateful to the Apostolic Nuncio for his confidence in me to delegate me for this function. Through him, I renew my prayers and fidelity to the Holy father.

### **1. THE MINISTRY OF A BISHOP AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.**

From the Gospel of St. John we hear the command of the Lord Jesus “ Remain in my Love” as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you...” this is my commandment; love one another, as I have loved you” ( Jn 15: 9-17). As we can see this command is given to all the disciples, in fact to the Church. All are called to share in the Trinitarian Life of Love. However, the mission to evangelize given to the church is more specifically addressed to the Apostles. St. Matthew in his gospel records that the Lord Jesus on the day before his ascension gave the missionary mandate to the apostles when he said to them” go therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the command I gave you.

And look, I am with you always to the end of time” (Matt 28; 18-20). The Apostles and their successors have remained committed and faithful to this missionary mandate. This call to evangelise is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church and is her deepest identity. The Church exists in order to evangelize” (Evangelii Nuntiandi, n.14). Pope Benedict xvi, teaching on new Evangelization in his Motu proprio *Ubicumque Et Semper* reiterated that it is the duty of the Church to proclaim the Good news. This mandate more or less defines the ministry of a bishop- as it has passed on to them as successors of the apostles. The old adage reminds us that “ *Ubi Episcopus ubi Ecclesia*”.

The Church teaches us that every Bishop, by vocation, hears from the lips of Christ, the words: feed my sheep” (Jn 21:17). Each Bishop is a successor of the apostles who like Christ the master laid down their lives for the sheep (cf. Jn10:11). The Bishop is called not only to continue the mission mandate but in addition he offers guidance, strength, security while at the same time overseeing and uniting the community of believers, the children of God.

The office of the Bishop constitutes an enormous challenge. *Christus Dominus* summarizes it in the following words: “ the Bishops... have been designated by the Holy Spirit to take the place of the apostles as pastors of souls and together with the Supreme Pontiff and subject to his authority, they are commissioned to perpetuate the work of Christ, the eternal Pastor”( cf. CD n. 2). By his Episcopal consecration, the Bishop enjoys the fullness of the priesthood of Christ. This integrates him into the episcopal college and makes him the visible head of the particular Church entrusted to him. (CCC. 1594). He is truly an alter Christus as he makes Christ present in his person and his ministry. In his function as the Spiritual father of God’s Children he presides “*in loco Dei Patris*” (In the Place of God the Father)

The ministry or office of the Bishop can be summarized in his three-fold functions:

- ❖ Munus Sanctificandi – the Ministry of sanctifying souls.
- ❖ Munus Docendi – the Ministry of teaching and
- ❖ Munus Regendi (Munus Gubernandi) – the Ministry of governing or leading the people.

The bishop is expected to sanctify the world, believers and non-believers, the families, the youth and indeed all the children of God under his pastoral care (cf. can 383). It is good to remind ourselves that the appointment into the Episcopal office is the exclusive right and duty reserved to the Supreme Pontiff, Our Holy Father the Pope (Can. 377). Any attempt to make it a worldly affair will be

missing the mark. According to Canon 381, the diocesan Bishop has ordinary, proper, and immediate power to exercise his office. He exercises this power personally in the name of Christ.

The Biblical figure of Moses can serve as an inspiration to the bishop. He was a committed pastor, a courageous leader and a prayerful person, a true pontifex, a bridge and mediator between God and his people always returning to the people with a radiant face after his dialogue with the Lord (cf. Ex 34: 29). In summary the Bishop is called to enter the mysterious yet luminous cloud of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity- the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Illuminated by the light of the Trinity, the Bishop will be the sign of the mercy of the Father, the living image of the Son in pastoral charity, a man who radiates the light of the Holy spirit, a homo spiritualis, consecrated, guided, sent by the Holy Spirit and capable of guiding the people of God along the path of life in the journey through time to eternity.

To his priests, the Bishop is a father, friend and brother. He will love and listen to them, correct and comfort them, showing concern over their human, spiritual, ministerial and overall wellbeing. To all his people he pours out himself in pastoral charity like Christ the Good Pastor who came “that they may have life... (Jn 10;10).

## **2. THE MAKING OF A DIOCESE – EKWULOBIA**

As stated in Canon law “ a diocese is a portion of the people of God which is entrusted to a Bishop to be nurtured, with the cooperation of the Presbyterium, in such a way that remaining close to its Pastor and gathered by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular Church. In this Church, the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ exists and functions (Can. 369, Vat. II Christus Dominus, n. 11).

This is the mission to which the local Church is committed since Fr. Joseph Lutz arrived the banks of the river Niger on December 5,1885, later continued by Fr. Joseph Ignatius Shanahan (Our First Bishop) and today with the function performed at St. Joseph’s Ekwulobia as the Cathedral Church and Bishop Peter Ebere Okpaleke as our first Bishop, Ekwulobia is now a Diocese. It is interesting to observe that Ekwulobia town, the see of the new diocese is strategically situated in the centre and confluence of many towns, various cultures and trade

routes. The opportunities these offer for growth are many. I see enormous opportunities in this new diocese. I see amazing strength, zeal and commitment in the priests and good people of this young diocese. I see the joy and eagerness to be part of this history in the making. I see a great diocese of the future that sooner or later will grow and expand beyond imaginations. To our God be joyful praise.

My dear priests of Ekwulobia diocese, see in your Bishop a father, a brother and a friend. Together with the faithful collaborate, love, respect, support and be closely attached to your Bishop as the Church is attached to Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ is attached to the father so that in harmonious unity you bring forth abundant fruit to the glory of God. (cf. LG.27). The vision of an all-inclusive people of God in the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 56: 6-7) should always be remembered. Let everyone feel welcomed and loved. Join hands with your Bishop to make the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia stand out among others as a model in pastoral efficiency and flourishing of the kingdom of God.

### **3.WELCOME TO OUR BISHOP.HIS LORDSHIP, THE MOST REV. P. E. OKPALEKE - A CONSUMMATE CANONIST.**

My dear Bishop, the Most. Rev. Peter Ebere Okpaleke, allow me to congratulate you and rejoice with you today. *Auguri Caro Fratello!* I am confident that with you as the first Bishop of Ekwulobia Diocese, we are sure of a Diocese built on a very strong foundation, deep Catholic traditions, rich and authentic spirituality, ecumenical spirit, option for the poor and profound pastoral care of the people of God entrusted to your care. Bishop Peter Okpaleke is a consummate canonist, a brilliant scholar and an accomplished administrator.

He has proved his worth in various assignments as a diocesan Chancellor, a Parish Priest and a resource person in his area of specialization. A deeply spiritual man who exhibited uncommon faith, calmness, maturity, trust, firmness and fidelity to the Church, the Vicar of Christ and God in those years of travesties and challenges. The storms came, the waves rose yet your steadfastness and comportment were simply edifying; “like a lamb being led to the slaughter he opened not his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7). Your fidelity and grace of God have brought us today to this historic and joyful celebration. To God be all glory and honor. CONGRATULATIONS! I am sure that those experiences have prepared and enriched you even much better for the tasks and blessings ahead. We assure you

of our love and prayerful support. May the Lord be with you in your mission. *Jide ka iji, Okwute!*

## **GRATITUDE**

We are grateful to the Holy Father Pope Francis and the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Antonio Guido Filipazzi for this great gift of Ekwulobia Diocese to the church in Onitsha Province, Igbo land and Nigeria. Ekwulobia Diocese is long in coming therefore, we are equally profoundly grateful to all who initiated the vision and played their various roles, we say a big thank you to you all. We recall with nostalgia and with deep sense of respect and love, our venerable Fathers in faith: The Most Rev. Albert K. Obiefuna and Most Rev. Simon Akwali Okafor of Blessed Memory. I am sure they are very much around us here, happy and fulfilled. May they continue to rest in the bosom of the Lord. In a special way our gratitude goes to the incumbent Bishop of Awka Diocese, the Most Rev. Paulinus Chukwuemeka Ezeokafor and his Auxiliary Bishop, the Most Rev. Jonas Benson Okoye for sustaining the process and bringing it to a happy end. My Lord Bishops, thank you so very much. We thank all who have prayed and assisted in various capacities, may God be gracious to you. Our highest gratitude goes to our Heavenly Father, Almighty God from whom all our blessings come who has made this event possible, to Him be glory, honor and never-ending praise for ever and ever. Amen

## **PRAYER**

We pray for the new Bishop of Ekwulobia that God will enrich you with spiritual energy and wisdom and keep you renewed in his merciful love. We also pray that this event will attract an abundance of God's blessings on our Land and the entire world so that the sufferings of the present time especially the Corona Virus Pandemic will quickly come to an end, through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

***PEACE BE WITH YOU!***