

**Address to H. B. Patriarch of Alexandria Petros,
on the occasion
of the Consecration of the Cathedral Church of the Resurrection
Lagos 11 February, 2001**

It is a great moment for the pious people of the Church in Nigeria, today's Eucharistic gathering around You, Your Beatitude, the Head of the Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in Africa, is also the gathering during which You consecrated the Cathedral of the Church in Nigeria.

Your official visit to Nigeria, is of great significance because it assembled the pious people, leaders and laity, so that the tradition of our Church that call for the Bishop to be a bearer of unity, be fulfilled, "Wherever the Bishop, there also is the fullness of the Church" notes St. Ignatius. The Bishop, as image of Christ, has as main task and mission, to assemble those previously scattered.

Your Beatitude,

In the liturgical cycle of our Church, today is the Sunday of the Prodigal Son. The Word of the Lord resounds alive and immediate through it. The Prodigal Son, after the dissatisfaction he felt on having exhausted his created abilities, decides to return to the Father. It is both a Eucharistic and a liturgical passage. In the person of the prodigal, the whole of fallen humanity is portrayed. This same humanity 'came to its senses' and decided to respond to the Divine Initiative, for its own salvation from the tyranny of death and sin. It is not coincidental that the Father, when addressing the eldest son who is upset by the celebration being prepared, the Eucharistic banquet, defines the prodigal son's previous condition as 'dead'. "Rejoice then and be glad for your brother was dead and now lives, was lost and is now found". (Lk. 15:32)

Repentance and the realization of the vanity of absolutising the created world, transfigures the prodigal into 'new man', it introduces him, with the most formal and glorious way, into the New Life. The Father reassures him in every way "put on him the earlier garment and place a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet".

The hymn of the consecration service also refers to disregarding the old self and there are times when it is excusable to think that the hymnographer is

continually inspired by the meaning and content of today's Gospel reading. I mention a few phrases from the Consecration hymns: "brother, made new, and having placed aside the old man, live in the newness of life". In another hymn there is the admonishment, "come to your senses, O man!" almost identical, not only in content but also in words, to the "he came to his senses" of the prodigal.

Today, Your Beatitude, in Your Person, we offer to the Triune God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, the newly Consecrated Church, that was built many years ago by the ever-memorable brothers Anastasios and Christodoulos Leventis. We offer it as a token of our thanksgiving as "the wisemen offered the gifts, as the earth offered the cave, as the heavens offered the star". At the same time, all these pious people, each according to the measure of his personal repentance, offer themselves to be consecrated. We beseech You, as in image of Christ, to receive us even though unworthy to be called His children. The consecration of the Church is honored only if it is the consecration of the faithful.

In this way is man made new, in this way the day of consecration is honored". The service constantly reminds us that the consecration of a Church is the consecration of man and the whole of creation to new life. The whole meaning of the word 'εγκαινία' in Greek means to be included in the new. Christ brought this newness through the partaking in His Body and Blood, in which, through the Holy Spirit, man has a foretaste of the new, the incorruptible, the eternal. The consecration of a Church is the consecration of specific people to the Tree of Life, because in the past, the consecration of a Church coincides with the first celebration of the Eucharist, with the first partaking in the "New fruit of the vine".

The consecration here today, in Lagos of Nigeria, is nothing other than the consecration of the 'last-times' in history, due to the free participation of the faithful, regardless of ethnicity, in the Mystery of salvation worked out by Christ on behalf of all of humanity.

Today, here in Lagos, in this Church, the Kingdom of God, although not fully, is already present. "The old has passed away, behold all things are made new". The new world of the Kingdom of God is present in every Eucharistic assembly and death's sting has lost its power.

Your Beatitude, you reminds us today of the fine but definite sign, that the role and mission of the Church is to receive the mortal world but not to be

absorbed by it, to transform the mortal and the corrupt but not to be its self transformed to death. The Church falls into deadly state every time it takes its identity from the present and worldly, every time it takes its identity from anything that has been created, like the prodigal with the seedpods, like the first man from the forbidden fruit. The consecration to new life is identified with the entry into the Church and it marks a basic turn-about, like Abraham on leaning Haran. According to this the faithful ceases to take his identity from objective reality, biological, social, ethnic and national. A turn-about such as this, is the most extreme action in history. It is only in this that one can be freed from history and the chains of mortality, creativeness, and sin. Within this prospective relationship the world is re-created and creation is transfigured.

Your presence here Your Beatitude, is a call to make this new life a reality, to remain steadfast in unity, and not in division – a unity above tribe, color, borders – a unity that is not a break-down, but one that makes the above mentioned factors “places” of meeting and mutual enrichment in Christ. The Church receives the whole man, with his ways and traditions. It does not impose, but it transforms what is already there, giving it content. The Church does not reject any civilization, but transform every civilization.

The Church of Christ is open and receptive of every people and nation, without preferring over the other. The actions and witness of the great holy missionaries of our Church lead us even today, reminding us that Christ is ageless, without time, enduring, and that there are no holy nations or languages. It reminds us of the great truth that the Person is of greater significance than any Sabbath. The Church transfigures history within a personal relationship that functions within freedom and love, and not force, fanaticism, hatred of others, fundamentalism, the abuse of the Person. This is what the Church’s greatest contribution, to distinguish between tha which is given, to distinguish between primary and what is secondary, falsehood and truth, life and death.

The newly – consecrated Church is the place planted by Christ, in Your Person, and is therefore holy. It is a place of the Theophany. The placing of the relics of the martyrs in the Holy Alter, bears witness to the transfiguration of this place into a Church – an assembly of the living and departed, in a place of God’s Kingdom, a place of victory over death, a workplace of the beholding and the revelation of the Resurrection hope, a place of renewal of the whole world. “This house has been founded by the Son. This house has been consecrated by the Spirit”.

Your Beatitude

The Orthodox Church of Nigeria, at this moment, in my person, presents You with the first copy of the Baptism Service translated into Ibo and is dedicated filially to the Mother Church of Alexandria, the Throne of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist Mark.

We also present Your Beatitude with this set of Episcopal Vestments, so that through its splendor, the eschatological image of the One that Wears It, the High Priest, becomes more tangible and immediate and that the iridescence of another, unwaning dawn, becomes more obvious.