

**Speech of the Founder and First Chancellor of the University of Makeni Emeritus George Biguzzi during the Thirtieth Anniversary of his Episcopal Ordination: Our Lady of Fatima Cathedral, Makeni, 04 February 2017**

I wish to thank Bishop Natale for planning this Eucharistic Celebration here in the cathedral, in thanksgiving to God for the Thirtieth Anniversary of my Ordination as a Bishop. I also thank the Reverend Fathers, the Religious Sisters and Brothers, the catechists, the members of church organizations, and all those who form the Holy People of God in the diocese of Makeni. I thank the Honorable Resident Minister and the other authorities here present. I thank the religious leaders of other churches.

Today, having reached, by the grace of God, the age of 81 years and after 56 years and three months as a priest, including thirty years as a bishop, I have a long list of motives for which to give thanks to the Almighty.

First of all, I thank God for the gift of life and for the loving care received by my parents and family. I thank the Lord for the gift of faith transmitted to me by my Christian family and nourished by the parish communities I attended in my childhood. Then I thank God for calling me to the priesthood and to missionary life. I had started my formation at the diocesan seminary, but when I felt called to missionary life, at the end of philosophical studies, I joined the Xaverian Missionaries and I was ordained a priest in October 1960. A few years later, attracted by the work of Bishop Azzolini, I came to Sierra Leone and I landed in Lungi at the end of 1974. The Lord had planned for me to find here a new home. After a number of years, when Bishop Azzolini resigned, unexpectedly, I was called to replace him. I was ordained second bishop of Makeni by Pope John Paul II, now Saint John Paul II.

Bishop Azzolini and the first missionary priests, the religious brothers and sisters, had planted the church on solid foundations: parishes, seminary, pastoral center, schools, were opened throughout the diocese. The plan was laid out and, when I took over, we built on those foundations: More parishes were opened, new priests were ordained, more religious congregations entered the diocese, the local church became more African. We encountered also years of suffering, destruction and death during the rebel war. Yet life conquered death. The church and the country rose to new life. Today I can see a tremendous growth and I thank the Lord who called me to be part of this church as priest and bishop. My Episcopal ministry in the diocese has been long and, at times, very difficult, but ultimately grace-filled and joyful. As Bishop Emeritus life has changed, not ended. The responsibility of running a diocese has come to an end, but the special relationship and the love of a pastor for his people and his church has not ended; it will endure unto God's kingdom.

Since I came to Sierra Leone, early in my adult life, you have filled my heart. On my part, I will continue to cherish and love all those I have known and met during my ministry here: bishops, priests, religious, seminarians, Catholic women and men, young people and old, literate and illiterate, authorities and humble people, people of other churches and other faiths.

Now if I were to list all the blessings I received from the Lord and if I were to mention thankfully all the people involved in my priestly life, I would keep you here for hours on end. I entrust everyone to the loving embrace of the Lord, whose love is never ending.

With the words of the prophet Isaiah I say: "Let me sing the praises of the Lord's goodness, and of his marvelous deeds"; and with the words of Mary: "His mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him". This reminds us that our salvation comes from the infinite mercy of the Lord. If we were to rely only on our projects and our structures, we would go nowhere. The work of evangelization should be grounded on the love of Christ for every human being, particularly for those who suffer and are abandoned by society. In fact, the most important service we can render to a person is to announce to this person the Gospel of Christ. "It is not the same thing, writes Pope Francis, to have known Jesus as not to have known him; not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights" (EG 266). This is why, writes again Pope Francis, "today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church" (EG 15). A challenge that involves everyone: Bishops, priests, religious and laity. It is the challenge that I leave in your hands.

Today I wish to recall two particular moments of my episcopal ordination in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. The first moment I wish to recall is the message of Pope John Paul II during his homily. He told us (there were ten of us to be ordained bishops in that celebration): "Have an expanded heart". That is, a heart opened to everyone: Christians and not Christians, old and young people, men and women, healthy and sick, particularly the poor and those whom society abandons in the gutters of history. "Have an expanded heart" is the appeal that comes once more through Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation "The Joy of the Gospel": "The mission of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ has a universal destination. Its mandate of charity encompasses all dimensions of existence, all individuals, all areas of community life and all peoples. No human can be alien to it" (EG 181). A Christian's heart should never exclude anyone or be closed to people.

There is a second thing I wish to recall. During the ordination, the candidate to be ordained bishop kneels in front of the altar. Then two deacons come forward and hold the book of the Gospel over the head of the one to be ordained. It is a very meaningful gesture. It means that only Jesus Christ and his Gospel should be the guide of the bishop's life and service.

A long time ago, a Father of the Church, writing about the entrance of Jesus in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, said that the bishop is like the little donkey that entered the city carrying Jesus on his shoulders. It is a beautiful parable, and I believe it applies to both bishops and priests. Our work is to carry Jesus on our shoulders whenever we move through the streets of our cities and parishes. I wish I could be remembered for carrying Christ and for promoting his kingdom through our churches, pilgrimages, Pastoral Center activities, catechesis, diocesan synod, Christian marriages, Priestly ordinations.

I started by saying that after more than 56 years of priestly life, including 30 years as a bishop, I have a long list of things, people and events, for which to give thanks to the Lord. However, I have an even longer list of things for which to repent and ask for God's and your forgiveness. I will not make the list (most of the things are known to you), but I assure you that many times I have asked the Lord's forgiveness entrusting myself to His loving mercy.

Yes, I regret the mistakes and the wrong decisions that, at times, I made. Yet there is one thing I never regretted: to have become a missionary priest. Today on my 81st birthday, I think again about the day of my priestly and episcopal ordination. On that day, at the beginning of the ceremony of ordination, each candidate is called by name and he answers: Present, here I am (Adsum). Today I pray that when I will receive the final call by the Lord; I will be able to respond once more with joy: Adsum. Present; here I am, Lord.