

UNIMAK 2017 Academic Congregation, Saturday February 11, 2017

KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF GUEST SPEAKER GEORGE BIGUZZI, BISHOP EMERITUS OF MAKENI DIOCESE, AND FOUNDER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MAKENI

His Lordship Bishop Natale Paganelli, Chancellor of the University of Makeni,

Honorable Ministers of Government of the Republic of Sierra Leone, The Chief of Staff at State House, Freetown,

Rev. Professor Joseph Turay, Vice Chancellor University of Makeni, Other Vice Chancellors and Academicians,

The Paramount Chief and Traditional Rulers, Mayor and Makeni City Council members, District Chairman, Security Forces, Media Practitioners,

The clergy and religious leaders, Members of Staff, Our Partners in education, Candidates for Certificate, Diploma and Degree, students, invited guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Today it is not difficult to imagine that I am very happy to be here. I am honored that Bishop Paganelli asked me to be your guest speaker. However, that the exciting moment for you the candidates, is when you will receive your degrees, you will hold your degrees in your hands and then proudly parade them through the city wearing square caps and blue gowns. For the time being, you have to listen patiently to the speakers dispensing bits of wisdom. I promise you I will be brief.

Forty two years ago, January 1975, newly arrived in Sierra Leone, I was assigned to teach at Saint Francis Secondary School, here in this very quadrangle. Saint Francis Secondary School was a very good school and the pride of Makeni. Bishop Azzolini, a pioneer of education in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, had started it. Here in this compound, to use an expression of the Law profession, I had my pupillage as a teacher under the direction of the late Fr. Olivani and the late Mr. R. A. Kanu. It was for me an exciting time and a rewarding experience.

Attached to the secondary school there was a boarding department, housing some two hundred students. But the clock of history kept clicking. The boarding department closed and classes moved to the boarding dorms, properly renovated and rearranged. Meanwhile I was assigned to other missionary work. These classrooms began to deteriorate. The final blow came with the rebel war. All buildings were vandalized. What was left was overgrown by grass and became the hiding place for snakes and other crawling creatures, with the occasional wayward boy hiding here to smoke 'grass' covered by the high grass.

In January 2002 President Kabbah came to Makeni and formally declared: War don done! Guns had been silenced. Life came back to the town. Learning resumed. Looking at the dilapidated compound in this area, I asked myself what to do with this area. I met a number of young Sierra Leoneans who had returned from studies abroad. Together we shared a dream.

We had entered a New Millennium, reconstruction was going on all over the country, new energies were emerging. With a much younger Fr. Joe Turay, we began dreaming of an institution of higher learning; we dreamt of new buildings, new furniture, brushed compound, youth with books in hand, libraries and computers, auditorium and sports. It was the dream of a new University, privately owned and run by the Catholic Church in Makeni.

The dream had to become reality. We had to meet the requirements of the Law of Sierra Leone. We needed a qualified staff and adequate infrastructure. We had to overcome unexpected opposition to our plans. There were times we ourselves had doubts as to our ability to face the task. The dream kept us going and it became a shared dream. Qualified staff joined us, donors from the country and abroad supported us (refer to those present), students began to apply, the Government of Sierra Leone gave the official, legal approval raising the initial Fatima Institute to the rank of University: The University of Makeni.

In the sixties and seventies this was the compound of St. Francis Secondary School and Saint Francis was a good school and the pride of Makeni. Today these grounds have become University grounds and The University of Makeni is a good University and the pride of Makeni. A shared dream become reality.

The story of UNIMAK's dream contains the message; a message of challenges and opportunities. In fact, no dream will ever become reality if you keep sleeping. I am not referring here to the sleepless nights you have spent to reach thus far, but to a life's engagement. To reach a worthy goal is hard. To "build a civilization of love" requires commitment and hard work. To improve the nation requires integrity and passion for the common good. We Christians believe that heaven is our destination, but here on earth we have to work hard. God gave the earth to man "to cultivate and take care of it (Gen.2,16) and "with the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread" (Gen.3, 20). For those who believe in luck, remember that luck follows those who are enterprising and work hard. You may not have all the opportunities coming your way, but how you react to the circumstances of your life determines the direction of your future. The British writer Chesterton once said that "in your life 10% depends from what happens to you; 90% from how you react to it".

Challenges and opportunities for higher education in Sierra Leone call for Government involvement and concerted action at the national and international level. The Vice Chancellor has spoken competently about this. I will focus more on the individual commitment.

It is harder to build than to destroy. To build requires engagement and change. Recently I was reading a story about the US President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle. It was not always easy for them. Early in his life, President Obama was abandoned by his father. His mother had to struggle to get enough money to pay the bills. There were times when he felt lonely. His wife Michelle had a similar story. Her parents did not have a lot of money and neither of them had gone to college, but they worked hard and she worked hard and reached to the top. (Incidentally, few people know that Michelle Obama is of Sierra Leonean descent, because her parents belonged to the Goulah people, brought over to America from Sierra Leone. Her story is worth researching). Speaking to young students, President Obama insisted: "Even when you are struggling, even when you are discouraged, and you feel like other people have given up on you, don't ever give up on yourself". Aim high. "The sky is the limit", is a common challenge, but do not think that you can

reach the sky just by punching the cloud in your smart phone. A smart phone will not make smarter. You must go beyond that cloud and work hard. Eventually you are going to leave this institution and enter a world of challenges and opportunities. The University has given you training to play the game of life. Today the staff gives the kick off, but, from now on, you must run after the ball.

Pope Francis, speaking to University students in the Philippines, quoted his predecessor Pius XII who had wrote: "The direction that society will take tomorrow depends mainly on the minds and hearts of today's University students". If this was true 60 or more years ago. I wonder why the world is on the wrong direction: wars, corruption, poverty, racism, exclusion, ethnic rivalries, religious fundamentalism seem to prevail. Let it not be said, fifty years from now, that you failed in your responsibility to build a better world and a better Sierra Leone. You will be measured not by the title of your paper, but by the integrity and the size of your heart and by your commitment to the common good.

When problems and opportunities arise, you can Google for a Government position, for job opportunities, for the list of NGOs, for the number of churches and mosques, but you cannot Google the standard of your performance; the level of your integrity; the strength of your faith or the passion in your heart. Promise yourselves to have the courage to stand up for what is right, for truth, solidarity and justice.

At my age, I may soon become an Ancestor, but until that day I want to continue to strive for growth in godliness and humanity. Marquette University, the University I attended in America, has a challenging motto: "Striving for moral and intellectual excellence. BE THE DIFFERENCE". Around the world, even in Sierra Leone, we have a lot of intellectual excellence, but less, or little, of moral excellence. This is why, we often hear the expression, "The world no level", "Sierra Leone no level". To make things level, to make the difference, to make a better world, you yourselves: BE THE DIFFERENCE.

Yes, you the graduates: BE THE DIFFERENCE; You the staff: BE THE DIFFERENCE; you the students: BE THE DIFFERENCE; you the authorities and rulers: BE THE DIFFERENCE; you the religious leaders and I among you: BE THE DIFFERENCE; you the citizens: BE THE DIFFERENCE. Then dreams of good and great things will become reality.

I thank you all. Congratulations.