

KINDLING AFRESH THE GIFT OF GOD

(II Tim. 1,6)



**A PASTORAL LETTER OF
MOST REV. DENIS CHIDI ISIZOH**
Catholic Bishop of Aguleri

TO THE CLERGY, THE RELIGIOUS,
AND THE LAY FAITHFUL
IN AGULERI DIOCESE
AND ALL PEOPLE OF GOODWILL.

2023/24

PASTORAL YEAR

OUR NEW MISSION. GRATITUDE

1. On 12 February, at the opening session of the 2023 First Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, Archbishop Antonio Guido Filipazzi, the Apostolic Nuncio to Nigeria, announced the creation of the Catholic Diocese of Aguleri by the Holy Father Pope Francis and my appointment as its pioneer Bishop.

2. The announcement was warmly welcomed by the Bishops and those present at the Opening Session of the Plenary Assembly. It created an electric atmosphere of rejoicing in the new Diocese as soon as word got through. I was profoundly touched by the outpouring of love by all.

3. On 17 February, the day I returned from Abuja to Aguleri, a huge crowd from all around gathered at the Anambra airport and remained until the much-delayed flight landed, expressing their joy in singing and chanting. From the airport, a large group of people accompanied me all the way to my residence at Ugwundiuka, more than ten kilometres away, the crowd growing larger and larger as we advanced until the vehicles came to a complete stop, and we had to do the final stretch of nearly a kilometre on foot.

4. There was equally a large turnout of people for the Inauguration of the new Diocese and my Installation on 17 March 2023.

5. Our gratitude knows no bounds. First and foremost, we thank the Almighty God for the gift of our Diocese. With filial devotion, we are profoundly grateful to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, and all his collaborators. We thank Archbishop Valerian Okeke, the Clergy, and the People of God in the Archdiocese of Onitsha. For over a century, we walked and worked together in the vineyard of the Lord. The jubilation that greeted the announcement of the creation of our Diocese showed it was something longed for by the people, which the Lord, in his mercy and kindness, has now granted.

6. Our gratitude also goes to the missionaries who brought us the faith, and to many Priests, religious men and women, catechists, and teachers who helped spread the Gospel in our area. May the Lord reward them all in full measure, with eternal life for those of them who have passed from this life.

7. We are also most grateful to the people, and they are many indeed, who sacrificed their time and money to organize a big reception on the day of the Inauguration. We are mindful of our generous benefactors and invoke God's blessings on them. Many continue to pray for me, my ministry, and our Diocese.

8. I am particularly grateful to our pioneer Aguleri diocesan Priests, who freely chose to join me in building up the new Diocese. I thank the Bishops and Superiors who came to our aid by giving us missionaries and *fidei donum* collaborators to make up for the shortage of Priests we experienced at separation from our mother diocese.

OUR CHRISTIAN PAST

9. Christianity, especially the Catholic Church, has been here in Aguleri since 1888. The history of the birth and growth of Christianity in our part of the world is very well documented. The list of the Holy Ghost Missionaries who participated in the mission is available. Some of their tombs are clearly marked in the Catholic cemetery at Ugwundiuka, Aguleri. The grave of Fr Joseph Delaney, the first Priest ordained for the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria, is at the entrance of our Cathedral. These early missionaries taught us to live and die as Christians.

10. The missionaries' "magnificent Church" of 1914 stands beside our Cathedral. It is perhaps the only church building of the early stage of

Christianity still standing intact in today's "Eastern and South-Southern Nigeria".

11. We are privileged to have had many Christians who received the faith from the earliest missionaries, who set up Christian village schools that became the hub for spreading Western education throughout Eastern Nigeria.

12. The first seminary was started at Igbariam in 1924. It produced outstanding Priests, including Bishop John Cross Anyogu, Monsignor William Obelagu, and Monsignor Joseph Nwanegbo. The most distinguished among them is Blessed Fr Michael Cyprian Iwene Tansi. We hope that, in no distant time, we shall gather to celebrate his Canonization.

13. God created us to know Him, love Him, and worship Him in this world in order to be with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven. We received the heritage of the gift of faith through the dedicated ministry of the missionaries. It is a gift like no other, and we must not lose it. On the contrary, this gift bequeathed now imposes a mission on us to continue spreading and deepening it.

TASKS BEFORE US

14. On the day the Oath of Office was administered to me in the chapel of the Propaganda Fide in Rome, the following passage of the Second Letter of St Paul to Timothy was read to me:

I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity but of power and love and discipline.... Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ

Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” (1,6-14).

I listened to the passage with keen attention and a sense of responsibility. The commitment which it aroused in me made me choose as my Episcopal motto: *Entirely for God*. Our star and hero, Blessed Fr Michael Cyprian Tansi, has taught us: *“If you are going to be a Christian at all, you might as well live ENTIRELY FOR GOD.”*

15. Beloved Sons and Daughters, and all People of Goodwill, recall our prayer during the period of preparation for the Inauguration of our Diocese:

Lord, may the building up of Aguleri diocese be a project embraced by all, especially Priests, Consecrated Men and Women, Laity, and all men and women of goodwill, working together to develop a strong Church-community where the integrity of faith, the holiness of life, and fraternal charity flourish.

In this prayer, we put before ourselves some of the things we, as a Church, must work hard to achieve: strong bonding as a Christian community, profound and correct understanding of our faith, sanctity of life, and practice of true love.

16. To create a bonded community, we needed to establish human administration structures of a diocese. In the past weeks, we have organized elections for different statutory bodies and pious associations in the Diocese. These elections yielded distinguished men and women to serve at various levels, enabling us to work closely together as one community with one goal. I am grateful to the supervisors and all those who participated in the elections. We are ready to run a good pastoral year. May God bless all our efforts.

THE NEW SEMINARY OF ST PAUL, IGBARIAM

17. Priests are the closest collaborators of any diocesan Bishop. They take the Gospel to every corner of the Diocese. They announce the Gospel to the people. They are the principal administrators of Sacraments. They celebrate Mass and bring the Body and Blood of Christ to the People. They sanctify society, restore our relationship with God, and toil to build us up as a community.

18. St Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, articulates very clearly the need for those who announce the Good News:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (10,14-15)

We need those to be sent to preach and bring the Kingdom of God close to the people. A seminary is a place for preparing those to be sent to announce the Good News and sanctify God's people.

19. Beloved Sons and Daughters, and all People of Goodwill, training seminarians to become Priests occupies a prime place in my mind. On the day of my Inauguration, I announced that we were starting our diocesan seminary in Igbariam. I am happy to share the good news that the new St. Paul's Seminary Igbariam took off on 26 September 2023 with a crop of 120 young boys in a temporary site at Father Joseph Hostels in Aguleri.

20. On 25 January 2024, the Feastday of the Conversion of St Paul, we shall cut the sod to lay the foundation stone of the chapel of the seminary at its permanent site. We have consciously located our new house of formation for seminarians near the site of the first seminary built in 1924, which was later transferred and metamorphosed into Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu. The

Holy Mass and the ceremony of the Laying of the Foundation Stone will be done in the presence of the representatives of Bigard Memorial Seminary — the revered institution that produced most of us Priests today and which started in the same place a hundred years ago and is marking the centenary of existence this year. I invite all of you to this celebration.

21. Starting a new Seminary is a bold step we are taking at the very inception of Aguleri Diocese. Humanly thinking, we have no idea from where the funds will come to set up the buildings and necessary facilities. But we have a model in Biblical Abraham, who, at the limits of human planning and provisioning, taught us total trust in God. His answer when his son Isaac asked him about the sacrificial animal, which clearly they did not take along, gives us the needed reply: *YHWH (Yahweh) Jireh* — the Lord provides (Gen. 22,14). Trusting the Lord and counting on the goodwill of the sons and daughters of Aguleri Diocese and all our friends, we are confident that the project will be fully and quickly completed because we trust that the Lord will provide.

DEEPENING OF OUR FAITH AND COMING CLOSE TO GOD

22. For many years since the end of the Nigerian civil war, we blamed the government school takeover for the moral decadence in our society. In Anambra State, schools have been returned to the Christian Missions that originally built them. However, apart from scattered cases of improvement in the passing grades of a few students, school culture has not markedly improved overall. Access to quality education is still low, with large proportions of school-age children on the streets as vendors of fast foods and hawkers of articles of various kinds, and very young children out of school who have to help their parents provide food for family sustenance. All sorts of distractions are freely indulged, and not-so-few parents still do not subscribe to the view that getting

formal education in schools is important. Some of them unconsciously teach their children, and our society emphasizes that acquiring wealth is what matters in our world today. Formal education and values derived from it are no longer of interest or are not promoted. The high levels of violence and insecurity being witnessed everywhere in our society are some of the consequences of the not-so-successful education system. Perhaps less obvious, but undoubtedly connected, is the scale of corruption in social and political life.

23. I am already consulting and working with experts. Our children must be encouraged to return to school to receive the essential ethical/moral, civic, social, and psychological human values.

24. In religious practice, it would seem that we have carefully avoided looking closely into ourselves to see how we contributed to the shallowness of faith now prevalent among us. We are slow to talk about the harm which radical Pentecostalism is doing in our society: producing a bunch of lazy Christians that engage in the “sowing of seeds”, “casting and binding of devils”; promoting neo-paganism and presenting empty promises which when not fulfilled gives Christianity a bad image.

25. It is known that there are people who are not happy with the type of Christianity we have in Nigeria today. Who is responsible for this? What has changed in the way we present the Gospel Message? Is the problem coming from a society with a different worldview interconnected by modern communication? Is the Church out of tune with the contemporary world? These are not rhetorical questions. We have the task to respond to these critical questions systematically for there to be hope for positive and radical change.

26. We must return to the correct path to the integral education that the true Catholic faith offers.

REVIVING SOME OF THE CATHOLIC PRACTICES OF TRUE RELIGION

1. SUNDAY EVENING INSTRUCTION / ADORATION OF THE LORD IN THE MOST HOLY EUCHARIST / BENEDICTION.

27. On Sundays, we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord. It is the first day of the week. We usually gather around the table of the Lord for Holy Mass; we listen to the Word of God, who speaks to us in the readings of the day and the sermon; we participate in the offering of the Body and Blood of Christ to God; and we are nourished spiritually and physically in the Eucharist. It is a great privilege to be fed with the food of the Angels. *I nyere ha achicha si n'eluigwe nke bu sọ uto na mma.*

28. After the isolation at home caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, some Catholics have developed the lukewarm habit of staying away from Church on Sundays. Unless a person is impeded by sickness or something grave, I encourage the usual practice of physical presence in the Church for Sunday Masses. Some people do more: they have developed the habit of starting their day by attending daily Masses.

29. I consider it an absolute priority for every Priest to celebrate Mass in his parish Church/Station every Sunday. A parish Priest who cannot cover the stations under his care should invite other Priests to help him. But the names of such assisting Priests and their *celebret* must be submitted to our Chancery, as all our Priests have been duly instructed to do.

30. In the evening of every Sunday, the People of God reassemble in the Church for “Sunday Evening Catechesis.” Let this meeting be an interactive

session. The Priest explains the articles of our faith. In Aguleri Diocese, I urge every Priest to be physically present to interact with and explain aspects of our Catholic faith to their people. As the Child Jesus was found in the temple with the elders, asking and answering questions (Lk 2:41-47), I encourage every Priest to be found in the Church every Sunday evening. It is a duty, and we do it with joy.

31. After the catechetical inter-active session, follow the adoration of the Most Holy Eucharist and the Benediction. The Lord is truly present. *Isi ala ikpere ala k'anyị n'etiri Sakramenti ukwu.* Before Him, in this wondrous Sacrament, we bow and bend low in adoration, in prayer: *O Dinwenu, Onye hapuuru anyị na Sakramenti nke a dị itụnanya ncheta nke ahụhụ Gị. Nye anyị, anyị n'ariọ Gị, nsopuru nke ihe omimi nke Ahụ n'Obara Gị nke ga eme k'anyị nweta eiele nzoputa Gị.* Silence – the Lord is with us—a moment of intimate conversation with the Lord. With profound devotion, we receive the Lord's own blessing. *Ngozi diiri Jesu na Sakramenti dikarisiiri asọ nọ na ọlta.*

32. Beloved Sons and Daughters, and all People of Goodwill, I encourage each person to develop a personal relationship with the Lord, who is ever-present in the Tabernacle in our churches and chapels.

33. Many people have formed the habit of regularly visiting Chapels of Adoration to spend time with the Lord. I encourage them. *Esekpuro m Gị, Chukwu dị na nzuzo. Onye nọ n'ezie n'ụdị Sakramenti.*

34. I encourage the erection of a Chapel of Adoration in every parish in Aguleri diocese. When erected and blessed, it is a grave responsibility for every parish priest to take good care of the Chapel, keeping it clean and secure and ensuring that our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament is adored with dignity and piety. Frequently, the Priest should consciously visit and pray in this special place for his sanctification and to encourage his parishioners to follow his example.

35. On visits to the Lord, I have the duty to draw your attention to the joy of spending hours to pray in the Chapel, but it is equally my responsibility to encourage you to work very hard to provide for yourself and others who depend on us. The motto of St Benedict, the father of monasticism, is very well known — *Ora et labora*. Pray and work. While you spend hours praying, you must devote plenty of time working.

2. FIRST SATURDAY COMMUNITY ROSARY

36. In the last five years, I have visited and promoted *Community Rosary* in most towns of what is now Aguleri Diocese. From my experience in the many parishes I visited, I am eager to bring together all God's People under the maternal care of our Blessed Mother. I urge every Priest in Aguleri Diocese to assemble the people under his pastoral care every FIRST SATURDAY OF THE MONTH for a Community Rosary in the parish church. The Parish Priest or his Priest-Assistant leads such Community Rosary. The booklet for this pastoral exercise will be available from January 2024.

37. I introduce a short prayer to be said after announcing the mystery at the beginning of each decade:

(Igbo) *Ezigbo Nne m Marĩa, Nne nke Chukwu, biko búrú ekpere m tata bugara nwa Gị Jesu. Mee obi m ka o jupúta na grasĩa nke Chukwu. Nyere m aka ibi ndú di mma n'ụwa a, ka m were soro ndị Mmụọọma na ndị Nsọ niile kwee ukwe otito nke Chukwu n'ala eze eluigwe. Amen.*

(English) *O my beloved Mother Mary, Mother of God, I implore you to present my petitions today to Your Son Jesus; fill my soul with the grace of God; help me to live a good life in this world so that I may join all the angels and saints to sing the praise of God in heaven. Amen.*

SYNOD OF PRIESTS

38. Beloved Sons and Daughters, and all People of Goodwill, I am glad to draw your attention to the activities of many good Catholic Priests who carry out their Priestly ministry conscientiously and quietly. Some toil in tough circumstances: challenging terrain, using dangerous means of transport, long trekking, living without electricity and regular supply of light at night, enduring moments of unavailability of cash to buy some basic needs.

39. Seeing those who work very hard to promote the Catholic faith is pleasing. Some priests share the Catholic faith by preparing and posting their Sunday homilies weekly on WhatsApp platforms. I notice a growing number of Priest-artists who shoot videos to dramatize some gospel values. Some sing and compose interesting songs that uplift the soul. I admire those who devote time and resources to help those at the margins of society. Some of them promote vocations to Priesthood and Religious life. These Priests among the People of God do great things for God and man. I commend them for their devotion. May they have the encouragement of the Spirit in their work.

40. Some Catholic Priests, unfortunately, teach very shallow theology, and their lifestyles have not been very edifying. A growing number of Priests, especially young ones, toe the line of radical Pentecostalism and, sometimes, deceive people with their incoherent teachings and practices. This style of presenting the Gospel and its contents sometimes causes great distress to the Catholic faithful, leaving them confused. Borrowing just the phrase of St Paul, I say: *in hoc non laudo* (1 Cor 11,22).

41. In the new Pastoral Year, I plan to bring together all the Priests of Aguleri Diocese to discuss important matters relating to our work. I am happy to convene an extraordinary SYNOD OF PRIESTS, with the Theme: *“Priestly Ministry in Aguleri Diocese, Kindling Afresh the Gift of God”*. This Synod will

take place from 23 to 28 September 2024, *Deo volente*. A Deanery pre-synodal workshop will precede it. A timetable will be issued in the course of the new Pastoral Year.

42. A synod is something more than a workshop or a theological conference. Our Synod aims to enable us to respond as a Local Church to the challenges facing the Catholic faith in our world today. It is meant to be a transformative event which, it is hoped, will lead to a renewal of Priestly ministry and life in Aguleri Diocese.

43. The period of our Synod will allow us to deliberately review our life to discover ways for effective Priestly ministry and to renew it profoundly.

44. The major themes for discussion include our prayer life and holiness of life; ways of improving personal piety and our worthy administration of the Sacraments; the role of Priests in Christian families and guidance of the youth; effective parish administration; and strategies for winning souls for Christ. We shall reflect on the needs of our fellow Priests and the promotion of the priestly fraternity.

45. During the Synod, we shall follow some of the areas of Synodality which the Holy Father Pope Francis has encouraged. We shall listen to the voices of the Consecrated Men and Women, the Laity, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, and, in a particular way, our Brothers and Sisters of other Christian Denominations. We shall encourage them to assess our services among them and recommend areas of improvement.

46. I invite all the Faithful of Aguleri diocese, our friends, and People of Goodwill to join us in prayer for the success of this Synod.

**IN PRAYER WITH OUR DIOCESAN PATRON,
ST JOSEPH, THE HUSBAND OF MARY**

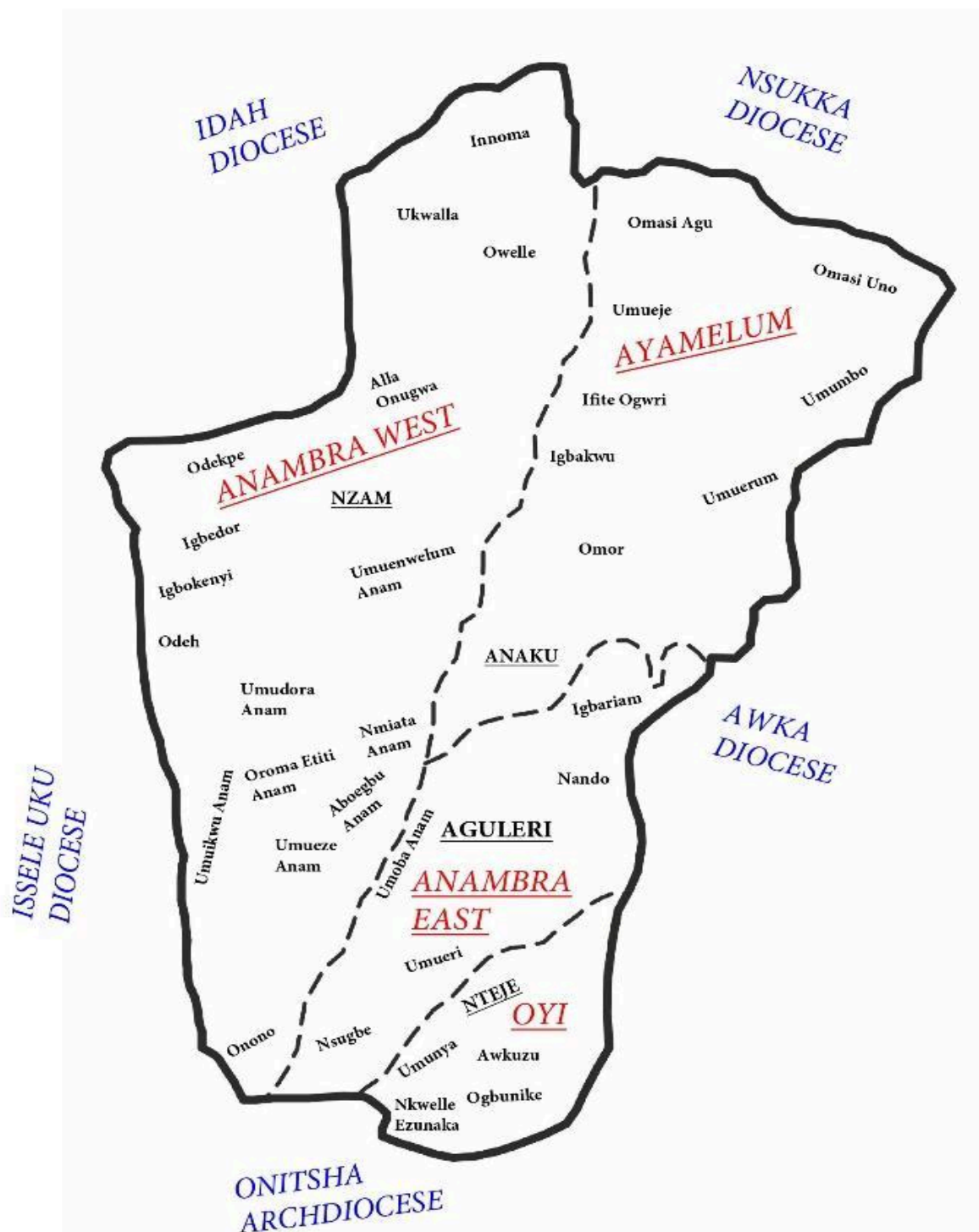
47. To the Patron of our Diocese, St Joseph, together with his most holy Spouse, the Blessed Virgin Mary, we turn. We place this Pastoral Year into their hands, asking them to join us in presenting our petition: *The good work You have already begun in us, O Lord, we beg You to sustain and make it bear abundant fruit. Amen.*

+Denis Chidi ISIZOH, *Bishop*
Catholic Diocese of Aguleri.

St Joseph's Cathedral, Aguleri.

3 December 2023

First Sunday of Advent.



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF AGULERI