

OUR GLORIOUS HERITAGE



PASTORAL LETTER 2005

MOST REV. VALERIAN M. OKEKE
Archbishop of Onitsha

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1. Introduction

One of the most basic questions in life is what is your name? Or who are you? Such a question could be addressed to a child learning how to speak, to a visitor in a foreign land, a traveller at the airport, a student of a foreign language...or the president of a country. In all cases the information sought is the identity of the person in question. The identity question when addressed to an individual, a group or an institution brings clear understanding when properly answered, and generates problems, crisis and confusion when not answered.

Closely related to the question of identity are such vital questions like where are you from; which country, which culture, which language...which parents? The answer to these revolves on the issue of heritage without which a complete understanding and background of a person would be lacking.

2. Explanation of terms

Meaning and types of heritage

It is useful to define the word or the concept of heritage. Heritage is what is inherited from the past. It is something handed down from an ancestor or predecessor. Strictly speaking, heritage is something other than property passed down from preceding generations, a legacy, a tradition. It includes the condition accruing to an individual or group through the circumstances of birth. There are types and levels of heritage, hence heritage can be natural, genetical, environmental, historical, religious or national.

i) Natural heritage

These are things, qualities or characteristics resulting from the nature or an organism. For example, the human person is a rational being, a rational animal by nature. He is also endowed with speech, motion, freedom, he aspires towards the transcendence, and so on. All these qualities are natural to man, given to him from his creation by God. They are what make man what he is as distinct species of being.

ii) Genetical heritage

These are qualities inherited from parents or grand parents. Such qualities differentiate between human beings. Human beings, over and above their natural endowments have some other genetic characteristics which they hold because they are offspring of a particular human being. The combination of the genes of this man and this woman gives rise to some special characteristics that further distinguish the individual.

iii) Environmental heritage

Our environment is important in our lives. We do not choose them before we are born into them. Consequently, we inherit them by the accident or providence of our birth. Thus a person can be a

citizen of a small island, and become automatically familiar with living in such an island. This may rather influence his choice of profession as perhaps a fisherman because most people in his environment are fishermen. Some others may be born in a place with vast and fertile expanse of land. They may become farmers because of environmental influence and heritage. Some may come to life in the forests of Amazon, and live in that environment. There are those who live in places where the environment has been totally polluted. Others may live in a clean and better one. But each of these may be inherited, that is, coming to us from those who have lived before us, but very significantly influencing our lives.

iv) Historical heritage

Our history both personal and communal also goes with us. A person may find himself in a community ravaged by years of war, or in another which has known only peace for many decades. Each society recounts its history, and makes alive the great and majestic acts of their forebears. They feel at one with such histories. They are the acts of their society, but they have a sense that they have inherited the greatness, and sometime the vileness of these acts. Therefore, it forms a part of their historical heritage. Such memories tell a lot about a people. The reason behind building of museums and writing of history of a people, a town, a country, etc are not far from their desire to preserve their common heritage.

v) Religious heritage

Heritage can be secular or religious. Religious heritage concerns those things or values inherited from the past which are related to the faith of the people in the supernatural. It concerns the different histories, the physical structures, attributed to the religion as well as the influence of the religion, the followership, etc that a religion commands and which continue from one generation to another.

vi) National heritage

These many types/levels of heritage and more can be seen both from the point of view of the individual, or from that of the group or community. When they are seen from the point of view of the nation as a whole, one can talk of national heritage, meaning by that, different things a nation has inherited from its past, from its geography, history, and heroes.

3. Our Attitude to our Heritage

In a wide sense, heritage can be good or bad. A society or an individual can inherit something praiseworthy, in such a case, it is something he cherishes or should cherish and nurture. It can also be something that is anti-value, and not worthy remembering. The general attitude is often to extol the praise-worthy heritage, and to try to forget the bad or dysfunctional heritage. That is perhaps an unconscious psychological positivity, namely, concentrating on what is considered good and noble in order to lead to even more good and praiseworthy results. However, a balanced attitude while not extolling the bad heritage nor sweeping it under the carpet, should be bold enough to recognize it, criticize and condemn it while taking the lessons for life that can be derived from it “that it may not happen again”.

Sometimes too, some heritage that is considered praiseworthy in one epoch becomes less so in another epoch. Therefore those positive aspects of our heritage, values that transcend time and tide should always be upheld.

4 Importance of heritage to the human being and the human community

It is H.G. Gadamer who says that no one speaks from nowhere. This is true because we as humans are always circumscribed by the context of our birth or growth, our socialization, our environment and so on.

Individuals have their origin, their genealogy, their membership of a particular community, as well as their society of experts, religion, crafts and profession. In the same way each community is circumscribed. However, being aware of our heritage and making use of the same have some effects on us which contribute in making us what we are.

The importance and influence of our heritage can hardly be over emphasized. For example:

- It gives us a bearing in this wide world. We could have inherited the colour of our skin from our parents, our accent from the environment of growth, our love of knowledge from our early teachers. All of them are different aspects of our heritage influencing our attitude to life and giving it a bearing.
- Heritage gives us a sense of history. When we realize that we are only members of a family which constitutes part of a village, part of a town, part of a country..., it becomes clear that we are only parts in an ongoing design of God in his creation. This gives us a wider psychological horizon and a sense of history.
- Heritage provides us with ideals to aspire to. This happens so often when we see in the life of those gone before us many good things that should be emulated and perpetuated. No wonder the epistle to the Hebrews enjoins us : “remember your elders...and as you reflect on the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith (cf. Heb. 13,17). Hence, heritage provides ideals and models.
- Heritage reminds us of mistakes to avoid. When heritage is bad, it can also be useful for we can see that the things which we inherited are not all positive. Thus we are kept on our guard against repeating the mistakes of the past.
- Heritage helps us to take thought of our own legacy. It helps us to reflect on how we are to be remembered when we are gone. We have inherited many things from the past. What are we doing without lives now, and what will come out of it? In gratitude for the good things we have inherited, we should make efforts to also leave behind something worthwhile for the future generation of human beings.
- Heritage often makes us happy as it assures us that we are in good company. This implies that what we are is due to the hard work and the legacy of those gone by. This in turn enables us to be more focused and determined to succeed in our undertakings.

• Golden Heritage is exemplified/typified by Christianity and the Catholic Church. Many instances and practices abound which point to the importance of what we inherit as creatures of God, as his adopted children, children of wonderful inheritance, including salvation wrought for us in Christ. The sacraments we celebrate, the liturgical seasons, and the life of our saviour reminds us of our privileged heritage. The many saints we commemorate in our Liturgy leave us glorious inheritance to point the way for us and to be our models in our struggle to accomplish the work of God on earth

5. OUR HERITAGE IS GLORIOUS

What this book is commemorating is not a common heritage. The Archdiocese takes its name from a city that is both gifted by nature and respected by indigenes and visitors alike. While recalling the attitude and impressions of the early missionaries, Ekechi recorded the following words of Christian missionary interest:

The first and most important place to which your attention should be chiefly directed is Onitsha, which appears to be the high road to the heart of the Igbo nation.

Those words “high road” and “heart” capture the assessment cum impressions of the visitors. But, Onitsha then was in addition one of the greatest centres of commerce along the west coast of Africa. The history of the golden heritage of Onitsha Archdiocese as a family of God started in 1885, with the landing of the Holy Ghost Missionaries on the shores of the River Niger at the ancient city of Onitsha. The missionaries landed with nothing except a message to deliver, a strong will to work, Faith and trust in God, and Love for the people.

From this spiritual powers, the old Onitsha diocese is now made up of three Ecclesiastical provinces namely Onitsha, Owerri and Calabar together made up of eighteen dioceses. At the moment what used to be Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province has twenty-one living bishops, over one thousand, six hundred Catholic Priests and millions of Catholic faithful.

When the missionaries arrived on the 5th of December, 1885, they were only two priests and two religious brothers. Today the story is different. They struggled and toiled for this royal patrimony which they bequeathed to us, a great heritage indeed which they handled and handed to us by their sweat and blood. Over their bones and sacrifices the church in Onitsha was built and linked to the One, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church whose foundation is Christ Jesus Himself. Onitsha Metropolitan See by then extended from the River Niger to the Benue River, from Onitsha city to Port Harcourt.

Truly rare in the history of human commitment and responsibility was so much heritage won by so few for so many. Yesterday that few toiled through many troubles and tears. They did not fear the battle and the cross, they did not fear the snares and the grave, with the vision of our heritage in view. Yes, full of faith, full of hope, and full and gilled with love, they did not wonder from the pathway of this heritage, but lifted its golden banner up, and never let it down. They moved from victory unto victory, and their courage rose with danger, that the strength from above will overcome the strength from below. Yes, with the armours of sacred Scripture, sacred Tradition

and sacred Magisterium, they charted uncharted causes and mapped unmapped territories for us as heritage.

The history of this heritage remains evergreen with its glory and sacrifices especially when we remember our early missionaries whose toil and trouble too great a tribute of praise cannot be paid. Father John Jordan recounting the heroism and supreme sacrifice of these great souls insists that they suffered as men have rarely suffered for the spread of the faith. They all died young, dying almost as they arrived. This neither stopped other missionaries from joining them nor slowed down the enthusiasm of those already at work. A typical example is a young man in his twenties, who had implored the Superior General to let him be a missionary in the following words: “O my knees I beg the favour of devoting my life to the salvation of souls in Africa, even though it means death. Let me save but a single soul, and I shall die with the desire of my heart fulfilled”. He was permitted to go to Nigeria on mission and he died soon after his arrival.

Further in the words of the great historian, “these missionaries should be judged by the splendour of their spirit of sacrifice.” Father Jordan narrated how they died almost as quickly as they came, yet not as a single one ever asked to be relieved of his post. And as man followed man into the soft red clay of Africa, the survivors gathered round his grave, crossed hand, and kneeling with bent heads, made a solemn demand on God:

Accept, O Eternal Father, the sacrifice of the life of this our brother in Christ; the sacrifice of our lives, too. But grant that over his bones and ours, a great Church will arise amidst the people whom we serve.

Yes, they came, they served, they died. A great church arose. That is our Onitsha Archdiocese. That is the royal heritage built by sweat and blood and over the bones of our missionaries — our fathers in the faith. That is the inheritance, the fortress, the imperishable patrimony erected by God (through these great men and women missionaries) against all infection and hands of decay. That is our Archdiocese a glorious heritage indeed, a heritage acquired at the price of life after the example of Christ, an inheritance undefiled, a fortress that cannot fade away, a patrimony kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation (1 Pet. 1,5).

These magnanimous souls that were our early missionaries did not count the cost nor heed the wounds. Consider the untold difficulties these early soldiers of Christ encountered, these include: the culture gap, the arrogance of some of the traditional priests, the obstacle of accommodation, the impediments of the civil administration (whose intention at the time was to enslave the people) and many more. Yet despite all these obstacles, and in spite of all these impediments, the more the danger, the more their missionary courage, the more the sickness and death, the more their zealous strength for the work of God moved from victory unto glory.

Father John Jordan has summarised this golden legacy in these heart-rending words:

Here was missionary heroism at its most sublime. Here was the kind of faith that had made martyrs' blood run red in Rome: that had raised the cross along the Amazon and the Hudson, that would raise it over the Niger. Here was a tradition that only the great-souled and the fearless, would accept and sustain.

The need to accept and sustain this glorious tradition is a duty we owe both to our spiritual fathers and to God. It is a challenge to give and uphold undying glory to God our Eternal Father, who remains unchanged in the changing times, it is a call to insert our epoch in gold on the sand of history.

The glorious history that is our heritage has many dimensions and many perspectives from which it can be recounted, namely:

- i) From the point of view of clerical missionaries
- ii) From the point of view of religious congregations of priests, brothers and sisters.
- iii) From the point of view of many lay missionaries, including the old teachers and catechists whose marvellous works contributed immensely to the present state of Catholicism among us.
- iv) From the point of view of commitment to the Christian message seen in such exemplary Christians as Blessed Father Michael Cyprian Iwene Tansi, and many others who for many reasons remain unsung.
- v) From the point of view of response to the message given by the people Eastern Nigeria. They open handed embrace of Christianity, and their providential predilection for Catholicism. We recall that many communities went out of their way to invite the Catholic missionaries to build schools and to establish churches.
- vi) And, from the point of view of wonderful and self-sacrificing leadership exhibited by Christian leaders.

All these mentioned and more, constitute an ensemble, they constitute our heritage. Many considerations will not permit us to go into an exhaustive discussion of all the aspects of our heritage here. What is being done in this write-up, is to take up the last of these, namely, exemplary leadership. We intend to reflect briefly on some aspects of the life and work of our leaders, mostly our chief shepherds in different circumstances.

The purpose of this write up is not a full blown history of the Church in our land nor the acts of our predecessors, rather it is more of a historical tribute meant to serve as an encouraging call to all of us their spiritual offspring, so that we can gain a new élan in our effort to spread the message of Christ, to internalise and to make it at home with our people.

6. The glory of our heritage

God is both the source and the glory of our heritage. Man's ultimate end is to give glory to God. God who is our creator, created us out of his goodness and love. God who is all good communicates goodness as his goodness flows to all creatures and to man in a special way. Man (the human person) enjoys God's special goodness because he is created in his image: in the image of God he created man (Gen. 1,27)). Further, man is a child of God by creation as evident in the Old Testament. God's abundant love for man can only be repaid with love. Therefore man's proper

response to God's love is to use all his power to praise and glorify God for his dazzling goodness. That is why prayer of praise which recognizes God's goodness is the best form of prayer. Our early missionaries glorified God in their work and gave their lives for the glory of God.

Yes, we glorify God in his goodness I the effect of our endeavour. We are God's creatures, hence in our good works, we give glory to Him to whom we belong. In the same way, a good student glorifies his teacher, a good child glorifies his parents, a good car its manufacturer, a good dress its tailor, a good human person his creator or maker God. In these other cases, things were made from existing things still we glorify their maker. But, God made us from nothing thus all glory belongs to Him alone. Thus our heritage is glorious not only on account of men, but more so because we are instruments for the glory of God. To him belongs all glory, for all we have and are, are by his grace.

The legacy of our forebears, our Christian leaders is glorious, not ultimately on account of individuals but on account of God who gave them faith and sustained their love. But because they served as good instruments whose effect glorify God both here and hereafter, they therefore deserve our undying gratitude.

7. The individual Leaders and the Chief Shepherds

The inspired sacred author of the Epistle to the Hebrews urged all Christians, "Remember your leaders who preached the word of God to you and as you reflect on the outcome of their lives, take their faith as your model." (Heb. 13,7). In the same way, St. Paul charged Timothy, his child in the faith, to "continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it" (2 Ti. 3,14).

Now, we are being called as the privileged spiritual offspring of our great missionaries, our leaders and fathers in faith, to fan into flame the spirit which we have all received, to prove ourselves as true sons and daughters of our spiritual parents by exhibiting courage, commitment and conquest in God's name and to His glory, to show ourselves magnanimous by upholding the heroic tradition which "only the great-souled and the fearless would accept and sustain".

As already stated, this write is not an effort to produce another history book with dates and details, rather, we intend to reflect briefly on the life and work of our heroes past, our spiritual leaders represented by the Chief Shepherds. Such will enable us to gather more enthusiasm and courage to continue their work, the mission of the Redeemer. If our leaders could achieve these feats in their time, with all the disadvantages peculiar to that age, then we have all it takes to hit the sky.

7.1. Father Joseph Lutz, C.S.Sp.: LOVE AS WEAPON

Many centuries ago, God said through the prophet Isaiah "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Is. 52,10). This prophecy was fulfilled for the people of West Africa occupying the area East of the Niger river and South of the Benue when four missionaries, members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit were sent to this people of the Lower Niger to enrol them in the register of God's children through evangelisation. This small band of missionaries were led by Father Joseph Lutz, a French Alsatian priest, a man of energy, unusual intuition, enterprise and intelligence. The other

members of the party were Fr. John Horne, Brother Hermas and Brother Jean-Gotte. All of them were young men in their prime. They were deliberately picked for this missionary journey to West Africa, an area “which had become known as the white man’s grave because of the high death rate among Europeans who attempted to live there.” The enterprise was expected to be difficult, hazardous and dangerous. It proved to be so or even worse than they ever anticipated.

The small group of courageous missionaries travelled via Liverpool, on the 10th of October 1885, and having made a stop in Sierra Leone, they arrived a place called Akassa, from where they could sail up the Niger to the hinterland. Unfortunately the “owners” of the port, a trading group called the Royal Niger Company, through their agent, Captain Christian, refused them permission to move up the river on the grounds that they were “unknown and had no recommendation or letter of any kind from the direction of London.” The unfriendly, unwelcoming attitude left the missionaries disappointed. Nevertheless, bold and undaunted, they proceeded on their journey to another port named Brass. Here providence rewarded them with a kind English protestant trader, Mr. Charles Townsend, who had good memories of his acquaintanceship with a Catholic Bishop in Gabon. Mr Townsend not only welcomed the missionaries into his house, gave them the permission to explore but also offered to take them up the Niger in his small engine boat.

The two priests left for the hinterland, sailing up-river with Mr. Townsend and arrived Onitsha on the 5th of December 1885. The two brothers and their 70-piece luggage were left at Brass. The ten days journey from Brass to Onitsha was most hazardous. They met terrible storms, a ragging tornado and groups of unfriendly creatures both men and animals. “Yet it never crossed their minds to give up. They had come to establish the kingdom of God, and they would do that or die.”

As the indomitable Father Lutz and his companions reached Onitsha, the history of the Catholic Church, east of the Niger was born. The enterprise has begun and there was no going back. The conditions were anything but favourable. Though the King of Onitsha welcomed them and gave them land, there was nothing on the ground. The coast was disease infested, the people were all still pagans, literacy was at a zero point, the Royal Niger Company had established a trading post at Onitsha, antagonizing the local people with the “white race” by buying slaves and intimidating the people.

In spite of all these Fr. Lutz started work in earnest. He rendered medical services, constructed mission houses, organized Christian villages and initiated the first move towards educating the people. Fr. Lutz was very inventive and flexible in searching out means of communicating the good news to the people. The sacrifices of these great souls were enormous. They were not afraid to work in the white man’s grave; they were not deterred by malaria which as at that time had no cure, they were not slowed down by death which cut them in their primes (by the 18th of January 1886 less than two months of arrival, Fr. Lutz buried his first colleague, others died in succession soon after). They did not give up.

This is the foundation Fr. Lutz and his companions laid, this the heritage they built, this the tradition they handed over.

7.2. Father Leon Lejeune: BUILDING ON A SOLID FOUNDATION

Father Joseph Lutz died in 1895 having left a solid foundation. His exit however created a big vacuum which his immediate successors, Fathers Reling and Pawlas could not fill because of ill health and short period in office.

The Catholic Mission in the Lower Niger was already known as prosperous and promising. Fr. Lejeune was chosen for the hopeful though challenging mission because a Vicar Apostolic fresh from Europe with no experience of missionary work in Africa would be totally unsuited for the work. Father Lejeune was a missionary in Gabon with some knowledge of Onitsha, since he passed Onitsha on his way to Gabon some years back. Father had also read reports on Onitsha as an outstation of Gabon.

There was a remarkable change in the methods of evangelisation under Fr. Lejeune. Before him, much emphasis was not laid on saving the lives of the agents of evangelisation. Father insisted that to have good results from their evangelical labours, there must be good living houses for the priests, as well as religious brothers and sisters, there must be efficient Catechist-teachers, well planned and sustained use of funds given for works of mercy, and finally a determined, on-going self-help projects which would enable all the Catholics, Catechumens and school children including all the destitutes living in the mission to be self-reliant. Father Lejeune's new programme heralded better health for the missionaries, more food for the Christians in the Christian village produced by the Christians themselves, and better health as well as self-reliance for the dependants on the mission.

With the number of deaths reduced due to better houses and good health, Father Lejeune had the time to go into palaces to preach the gospel and make new converts. It was during his time that John Samuel Okolo Okosi who was baptized by the protestants in 1862 but went back to paganism soon after, got definitively converted. John Samuel Okolo Okosi observed the many works of charity being done by the Catholic missionaries, the order in the Christian villages, the care in the leprosarium, the churches and projects built by the Catholic Fathers and their live of evangelical witness, and decided to convert to the Catholic faith. He was zealous in his faith that he became a full-time catechist. It was while Mr. Okosi was on active service as a catechist that word came to him in October 1900 that he had been chosen as the King of Onitsha.

Thus, from buying back those slaves, the Gospel moved to palaces and princes in order to make a better foundation as well as win more acceptance among the Igbo people, thanks to the foresight of Fr. Lejeune.

7.3 . Bishop Joseph Ignatius Shanahan:

CONSOLIDATION OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH AND BRINGING LIGHT TO A PEOPLE IN DARKNESS

The story of Bishop Shanahan can be summarized in the words of King James Okosi II, the Obi of Onitsha, in the year 1960, on Nigeria's Independence Day. As the King's royal cortege moved into the stadium for the celebration, he halted the royal entourage and addressed a Holy Ghost missionary.

Before I salute the flag, Father, I want to salute you priests from Ireland, especially the older ones; also the brothers and sisters; tell the Archbishop and all of them that it is you who got us where we are. You brought us God and you brought us schools. You knew Father Shanahan, didn't you? He should be here, too. He began it all.

The above quotation gives an insight into the apostolate of Bishop Shanahan. Yes, Shanahan could be called one of the Fathers if not the Father of Igbo civilization because of his school apostolate which he pursued more than any other at that time when literacy education was yet to be fully appreciated. He made the majority of the people literate through his school system. Shanahan could also be called the Father of the Catholic faith in Igbo land and the entire area East of the Niger because of his efforts to consolidate the work of his predecessors by carting the Gospel message to all the villages, all the nooks and crannies among the Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, Ogoja, Igala, etc. Yes, Shanahan and his companions "brought" God to the people and brought schools which made them educated, civilized and part of the modern world.

The missionary zeal of Shanahan started in the Junior Seminary. Thus Shanahan writes his superior after his Junior Scholasticate:

Very Rev. father, it is unnecessary for me, I believe, to tell you with what ardour I desire that thrice happy day, when I may join that holy phalanx which combats and dies over there in Africa for the holiest and the most sacred of all cause.

However, after his ordination on the 22nd of April 1900, the young priest Joseph was not sent to Africa on mission. He was rather sent back to the High school to teach younger ones since he was intelligent and gamesome. Two years later, Father Xavier Lichtenberger a missionary working in southern Nigeria visited Ireland and gave a lecture to the young students in Rockwell College. Father Xavier spoke of the great harvest in Africa, the difficulties of the mission over there and challenged the youths to "come and seek martyrdom in Nigeria". The appeal produced great effects which made Shanahan volunteer specifically for southern Nigeria. He again wrote an application for missionary apostolate. The response was in the affirmative and Shanahan was sent to Nigeria in the year 1902. By 1905 exactly a hundred years ago, Shanahan was the prefect Apostolic of the Lower Niger which developed to become one of the greatest success stories of missionary endeavour in the twentieth century.

The high points of Shanahan's missionary strategy include building schools in almost all the villages within his prefecture, building Training centres for teachers and catechists, building a Seminary for indigenous seminarians with the intention of having indigenous priests, and founding a religious congregation for women with the intention of having young professed nuns who would teach and educate their Nigerian counterpart. In all these missionary efforts Shanahan's understanding and respect for African culture in general and Igbo culture in particular was evident.

The effect of Shanahan's apostolate was enormous. With so many educationists produced through the teacher training colleges, so many catechists through the catechetical institutes and so many young graduates from the Catholic secondary and primary schools, there was a total transformation of the people. They could enrol in the register of children of God through baptism and their knowledgeable pursuit of sanctity, while at the same time they could join the march of civilization

by joining the literate world. No wonder King James Okosi II could say without fear of contradiction that Shanahan and missionaries got even political independence to the people by educating them.

The work of consolidation together with the legacy of taking care of soul and body were passed on by Shanahan to his co-adjutor Bishop, the Most Rev. Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp.

7.4. Archbishop Charles Heerey:

INTENSIFICATION OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH AND FORESIGHT

Having obtained permission from His Holiness, the Pope, Dr. Shanahan consecrated the Rev. Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp., on 29th May 1927 to assist and eventually succeed him.

Heerey was not to shy away from the challenging work rather he proved to be the right man at the right time. Remembering Archbishop Heerey many years later, Archbishop A.K. Obiefuna had this to say, “In fact among our Christians... ‘Heerey’ meant everything good. It meant that towering handsome man of God; that fearless man that always spoke his mind and the truth come what may; that man of education; that man of Solemnity especially in liturgical ceremonies.” True, the choice of Heerey as Bishop was no doubt the work of the Holy Spirit. He could walk with perfect fitting in the great shoes of his predecessors. Heerey was “destined to consolidate and amplify and improve upon the heritage that fell to his lot, particularly in all that concerned education and seminary work, the two pillars on which even the most enterprising missionary effort must rest, if it is to endure.” Bishop Heerey who was barely five years ordained as a priest and teaching in the senior seminary served under Shanahan as Co-adjutor for five years (1927 – 1932) before serving as the incumbent Bishop and the first Archbishop of Onitsha for thirty-five years (1932 – 1967). Today, time has proved that the association and combination of these two Bishops, Shanahan and Heerey, was for the Church and Nigeria a blessing of the highest magnitude. There you have on the one hand, an aging Bishop with a vast experience and a deep sense of the supernatural, the architect and planner of new missionary policies and on the other hand, a youthful zealous, dedicated Co-adjutor Bishop who would in a spirit of loyalty and respect for his predecessor implement his plans.

Bishop Heerey did not only implement the plans and great policies of his predecessors but with great vision and foresight prepared a formidable base for a great church in the future. Shanahan build a diocesan Major Seminary (in 1924) at Igbariam, Heerey upgraded it to a regional Seminary and re-located it to Enugu. Shanahan started the magnificent Holy Trinity Cathedral, Heerey completed the Cathedral with modifications. There were health and medical services to the people from the time of Fr. Lutz but it was Bishop Heerey who built the St. Charles Borromeo Hospital which became one of the biggest medical centres east of the Niger. There were joint primary schools for nearby villages before Heerey but with Heerey, schools were built in all the towns and villages no matter how inaccessible and remote. The junior Seminary began by Shanahan was upgraded to a flourishing school by Archbishop Heerey. Heerey built many Catholic Secondary Schools for boys and for girls. These include Christ the King College and Queen of the Rosary College which rank among the most famous. He founded the Immaculate Heart of Mary Mother of Christ religious congregation, one of the first religious congregations to be founded locally.

The apostolate of Archbishop Heerey was very future oriented. He ordained many Nigerian priests; he sent many of them on further studies to prepare them for work in the future (many of our Bishops and Seminary teachers including Cardinal Arinze were beneficiaries of this wise programme). He created many parishes to enable the gospel message reach the people and finally, as if anticipating the future socio-political problems of Nigeria. The Nigeria born, young, dynamic priest, Father Francis Arinze was chosen as his successor, a choice which aided Archbishop Heerey's vision and love for his flock as well as a great blessing for the local church. The choice of a Nigerian born priest, Arinze, was like passing-on the missionary work to the indigenous clergy. With good preparation already given to the local clergy, the seeming risk became a blessing and the work of God continued uninterrupted.

8.1. Blessed Michael Cyprian Iwene Tansi:

THE "HALO" OF OUR LAND

The life of Blessed Tansi hardly fits into this write up due to the limitations imposed on it but because of his exemplary life which shows extra-ordinary commitment and acceptance of the Christian message, the story of our legacy would be incomplete without the role of Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi.

Michael having abandoned the traditional religion of his parents and desiring to live entirely for God following the teachings of Christ, accepted baptism at the age of nine. Further, after his initial education which gained him employment as a school teacher in his home town Aguleri and later at the urban city of Onitsha, Michael abandoned the comfortable teaching profession and entered the Seminary in pursuit of the life of sanctity through the living of evangelical counsels.

After his priestly ordination on the 19th of December 1937, Father Michael Tansi embraced the priestly apostolate with indescribable zeal. He was a model priest in all the known aspects of priestly life. In poverty, chastity and obedience, he was exceptional. In being a role model of young people, he was a genius, in being a good pastor with a listening ear, with compassion for his people and available to the people, he had no equal. In being a builder, an innovator, a teach and "all things to all men", Father Tansi had no rival. And, in living the life of evangelical witness, detachment from worldly pleasures and priority attention to the things of God, Father Tansi was simply a model.

On the other hand, the life of Father Michael Iwene Tansi seems to say that the Gospel message of the missionaries has permeated the African soil. The message is no more a theory, it is now concretely lived by the people.

It was in Father Michael Tansi's first parish as a pastor, the St. Anthony's Dunukofia parish that he met a young intelligent pupil Francis Arinze. The "holy man" cum pastor, Rev. Fr. Michael Tansi made such an excellent impression on the photographic minds of the young Arinze and his companions that many of them entered the seminary to become priests in order to be holy like their hero-model. God blessed their intentions such that from among them, many priests were ordained, five Bishops later emerged among whom was young Francis Arinze (a great admirer of Father Tansi) who became Co-adjutor to Archbishop Heerey and the first Nigerian-born Archbishop of

the Metropolitan See of Onitsha. Francis Arinze was also the first Nigerian-born Catholic Archbishop as well as the first Nigerian Cardinal to work in the Vatican. But the most important and interesting thing about Arinze is that his impressions of Father Michael Tansi as a holy man, a model pastor and a saintly man to be emulated remains undiluted.

Cardinal O'Connor of happy memory, the later Cardinal Archbishop of New York, once said that "For the Blessed Michael Cyprian Iwene Tansi to have "produced" Cardinal Francis Arinze is enough miracle for the Church to proclaim him a saint".

8.2. Francis Cardinal Arinze:

HOME COMING OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH

Father Francis Arinze as he was then called was barely thirty three years when he was consecrated a Bishop. He was a Co-adjutor to the great Archbishop Heerey. Father Arinze was ordained to the priesthood six years earlier in Rome at the age of twenty-six and as at the time of his Episcopal consecration, he was the youngest Catholic Bishop in the world. Two years later in 1967, Archbishop Heerey died, passing on the mantle of leadership to the young (35 year old) Archbishop Francis Arinze.

The legacy has now been passed on to indigenous clergy. Can they maintain the tradition of the great-souled and the fearless? Could the young Bishop manage the presbyterium that was still predominantly white expatriate priests? Would the young church in African listen to the African Bishop? These are some of the questions going on in thinking minds.

But the more challenging problem was that Archbishop Francis Arinze came into office during a huge political crisis in Nigeria. A few days after his installation as the incumbent Archbishop of Onitsha, the Nigeria/Biafra war broke out. It was his entire ecclesiastical province that was name the Republic of Biafra. It was a very difficult period for all the people living in Biafra and more difficult for the pastor who had to contend with spiritual and essential material needs. More than half of the population became refugees in a matter of months. There were no food, no water, no medical services, no salt. The people were dying in their thousands. Hunger and sickness were ravaging many. It was a most horrible condition that is better not experienced by anyone. In the midst of the crisis situation, the young Archbishop Arinze⁴ kept calm. He had very clear ideas about what to do. He initiated extra pastoral care for the teeming population suffering the ravages of war. He build edifice of solidarity among the people, fed the refugees displaced from their homes, attended to the hungry and the sick, he became a pillar of support for the clergy and religious as well as a source of hope for the people. Above all, Arinze meticulously kept the Church away from the political decision of the new republic.

At the end of the war, the people of Arinze's province were reduced to total poverty, hardship and misery. There was hardly any family which did not loose some responsible, promising sons and daughters to the war. Millions were dead and many homes were devastated. As if that was not enough, all the Catholic schools were confiscated by the government. All the foreign missionaries were deported from the archdiocese of Onitsha. The seminaries were all destroyed during the war.

There were only very few indigenous priests, very few seminarians, poor infrastructure, no money. And people were hungry.

Arinze swung into work. The work involved both reconstruction and rehabilitation. There was need to accept the will of God which the Archbishop disposed the people to do. The seminaries, hospitals, fathers' houses and convents were rebuilt, other essential places followed suit. There was a massive vocation drive organized by the Archbishop and his priests' functionaries in the parishes, schools and villages. The Archbishop devoted some of his time during each pastoral visit to preach vocations. The outcome was tremendous. There was a vocation boom within half a dozen years.

Arinze empowered the laity through constant retreats, seminars and regular pastoral letters. He spent little on himself and taught the priests and religious to appreciate the value of a simple life-style. He spent much time on prayer and established two monasteries, one for men (the Benedictines) and the other for men (the Cistercians). He founded a religious congregation of Brothers whose charism is catechesis. In all, Arinze proved himself a pastor, a builder, a preacher, a scholar, a brother to the poor and less privileged, a leader, a great missionary.

Dominic Cardinal Ekandem, the first Nigerian Cardinal described Archbishop Arinze in these words: "As a priest and more so as a bishop, Archbishop Arinze worked tirelessly for Christ and his Church. His voice eloquent and his pen versatile have long been heard and read through the land. His special charism is that of moving and doing. His Grace initiates, leads and gets great things done for Christ. He is an apostle in the grand tradition of saint Paul, the apostle of the gentiles. He is a patriot of great distinction." Recently, a young writer evaluating Arinze's many contributions says, "His slim book, titles Sacrifice in Ibo Religion, is arguably the most cited book in Igbo religion for the past thirty years." By this book, he says "Arinze ranks with such eminent scholars and professors as V.C. Uchendu, Elizabeth Isichei and among the most influential contributors to the study of Igbo culture and religion." The writer further remarked that Arinze's contributions are all the more significant if we remember that others had the advantage of the facilities proved by the university environment while Arinze was virtually outside academic circles while doing most of his writings.

Arinze's era could be described as the home coming of the Catholic faith as he has totally handled and handed over the heritage with equal heroic decorations. His work becomes more appreciated when we consider the difficulty under which he worked. His youth, the war, the expulsion of the missionaries, the destruction of the people and their property and an unfriendly government. His efforts were unflagging as he weathered through the storms. When eventually he was transferred to Rome, in a matter of few years, he transformed the hitherto obscure little office of the Interreligious Dialogue into a very effective and influential arm of the Vatican. No doubt, Arinze is today one of the greatest clerics of the Eastern Nigeria, if not Nigeria as a whole.

The legacy has been passed on, the tradition is transmitted, not by a foreign missionary but by a Nigerian-born son who imbibed the spirit, the Gospel has come home.

8.3. Archbishop Stephen N. Ezeanya:

LET MEN SEE YOUR GOOD WORK

When His Holiness, the Great Pope John Paul II visit Nigeria in 1982, he spotted the dynamism of the then Archbishop Francis Arinze. The Pope decided that Arinze would be more useful and effective in Rome as the centre of the universal Church. Thus, Archbishop Arinze was appointed to Rome and the gain of Rome became the loss of the Archdiocese of Onitsha.

With exit of the charismatic, multi-talented Francis Arinze from Onitsha, he left behind a legacy of pastoral excellence, liturgical perfectionism, administrative charisma and academic brilliance. Providence chose the sexagenarian, graceful spirit-filled Monsignor Stephen Nweke Ezeanya, the then Rector of the Catholic Institute of West Africa as the able successor to Francis Arinze. Archbishop Ezeanya worked with zeal and dedication. The methods were different but the principles were the same. Archbishop Ezeanya (then almost 65 years old) had gathered fame and experience in many places he worked as a pastor. As a lecturer in the University of Nigeria, he was a model priest, a dependable administrator and a father to both faculty members and the students. As an administrator in the Enugu Bishop's office, he was an excellent manager, as the Principal of Catholic Secondary School, he was a role model.

All these experiences in pastoral leadership he brought to bear on his work as the Metropolitan Archbishop of Onitsha. Archbishop Ezeanya took special interest in the poor and less privileged without neglecting the rich. He established Justice and Peace Commission in almost all the parishes in the archdiocese. The riverine areas of the archdiocese, generally regarded as very difficult, received his special attention. Though Archbishop Ezeanya's period of office was ten years out of which he was sick for half of the time, he made a tremendous impact through his evangelical lifestyle, his preaching, writings and compassion for all.

8.4. Bishop Emmanuel N. Otteh:

TO GIVE TO HIS PEOPLE KNOWLEDGE OF SALVATION

The story of our privileged heritage would be grossly incomplete without the name and the role of His Excellency, the Most Rev. Emmanuel N. Otteh. When Father Otteh returned from further studies in Rome, he was sent to the Junior Seminary where he later became the Rector for more than a decade. Father Otteh as he was the called, influence the church in this part of the world by living an indelible positive mark on his students. He knew all his students by name. He had eyes for details and neglected nothing. He was a born teacher, an accomplished formator, a builder and a loving father. He wanted the best for the seminary and for each student.

When in 1975 the then Archbishop Arinze appointed Bishop Otteh, the administrator of the Holy Trinity Cathedral, he came with his working zeal, competence and fines. Many of the structures at and around the Cathedral were erected during his period in office. The Shanahan hall though conceived before his arrival as administrator, was maximally built during his period of service to his credit. The Brothers of St. Stephen's Generalate was started and completed under him. The Sancta Maria Primary School was reconstructed and refurbished. The Centenary field was

constructed and turned into a multi-purpose stadium under his administrative guidance. The entire Cathedral compound was walled by Bishop Otteh. Everybody agreed that Bishop Otteh was an efficient manager and exceptional administrator.

On the field of catechesis and youth formation, it is on record that during the time of Bishop Otteh (then Monsignor Otteh), Holy Trinity Parish sent between twenty and thirty (20-30) qualified candidates to the junior seminary annually. Bishop created out-stations from Holy Trinity. He introduced many programmes that made the people very proud of their parish as well as very satisfied that they were approaching life of holiness.

Francis Cardinal Arinze summarized Bishop Otteh's work by saying that he turned Holy Trinity into a model parish especially in matters of catechetical, organizational, orderliness and retreats. In fact Bishop Otteh passed on the heroic legacy as you cannot work with him without feeling that this man seeks perfection in his work to the glory of God.

8.5. Archbishop Albert K. Obiefuna:

FORWARD EVER KEEP THE LIGHT SHINING

The Most Rev. Albert Kanene Obiefuna with his experience as the first Bishop of Awka, where he served for seventeen years, was transferred to Onitsha to succeed Archbishop S.N. Ezeanya of happy memory.

On assumption of office as the Metropolitan Archbishop of Onitsha, he continued the dynamism of his forebears. Achievements tumbled over one another in ceaseless succession. A new Bishop's house was added to the Archdiocesan secretariat, a chapel of adoration was established in the man Bishop's house, new guidelines were issued on prayer ministry and healing, the Cathedral was expanded by about thirty percent while still retaining its original shape and architectural beauty, the front of the Cathedral adorned with giant size statues of the twelve apostles and a life state of Bishop Shanahan gracing the landscape in a semblance of motion commemorating the arrival of the early missionaries.

Archbishop Obiefuna initiated the culture of building separate chapels of perpetual Eucharistic adoration in Onitsha Archdiocese to remind us of our obligations to the Eucharistic Jesus and as a sign of God among men in the Eucharist. The list of Archbishop Obiefuna's achievements would be grossly incomplete without mentioning the ultra-modern Blessed Iwene Tansi major Seminary which he organised the diocese to build in a record time of less than two years as a birthday gift to our Lord Jesus in the year 2000. This is the first of its kind built by local efforts in this part of the world. Again Archbishop Obiefuna's foresightedness made him to request for an auxiliary bishop when he was still strong at Awka and for a Co-adjutor in Onitsha. The same commitment to the spreading of the Gospel gave rise to the creation of Nnewi diocese from Onitsha and the consecration of its first Bishop on the 10th of February 2002.

Archbishop Obiefuna has gently handed over the batten of office, the legacy goes on.

9. What can we learn from the example of our leaders?

9.1. Faith: Going through their lives, one thing that is remarkably common is their undaunted courage informed by unshakeable faith in God. Only faith could make the missionaries volunteer “to go to Africa to seek martyrdom”. They believed that over their bones, a great church would arise.

9.2. Hope: Our leaders were men of hope. Even when the situation seemed hopeless, they continued to hope in the infinite mercy and boundless love of God. The difficulties surrounding their work at any point in time could not affect their hope.

9.3. Charity: Love was their greatest asset, their greatest weapon. The numerous works of mercy, their care for the poor, the building of hospitals and leprosy clinics, the feeding of the poor, the distribution of relief materials to the refugees, were all motivated by the love of God and neighbour. Their love knew no bounds, no discriminations, no exceptions. This in turn won them numerous converts, won acceptance from the people and gave glory to God.

9.4. Self-sacrifice: Our leaders were able to virtually offer themselves for the spread of the Gospel and for the good of the people. They did not count the cost nor heed the wounds.

9.5. Hard work: Each of our leaders is a showcase of hard work. They devoted themselves their time and their talents to the work of God. They were all things to all men in order to save some at any cost.

9.6. Trust in Providence: These are men who abandoned themselves to God’s providence. Each time they planned one thing and saw another happen, they accepted the result. God’s goodwill was acceptable to them at all times.

9.7. Inventiveness: These people were ever ready to find new methods for the work of evangelisation. From the management of persons and resources to the building of structures, their creativity was evident.

9.8. Vision: These men should be praised for their extraordinary vision. They were able to look ahead in order to chart courses that had momentous effect. In their choice of functionaries, in their building of structures, in their acquisition of property, in human formation, they had eyes on the future and the glory of God.

9.9. Knowledge: These people were men of knowledge and intuition. They had both the acquired and the infused knowledge which they totally put at the service of God, the Gospel and the people they served.

10. Conclusion:

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES:

It is God’s gracious gift to be privileged with such a historic background, it is the hand of providence to be the spiritual offspring of heroes and martyrs, it is God’s love to belong to the great Onitsha Archdiocese. What are we doing with our glorious heritage, what are we doing to

hand over to posterity as our own legacy? These are questions that should occupy us as well as inform our actions.

Yes, we always remember that it is God's work. Hence, Paul plants, Apollo waters but God and only God gives the increase. Therefore, the first thing is to pray. But our prayer must be followed up with faith and heroic actions. Let us conclude this in the words of the inspired writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God". (Heb. 12,1-2).

Given this day, Sunday, November 6, 2005

At the Holy Trinity Cathedral, ONITSHA.

Most Rev. Dr. Valerian M. Okeke

Archbishop of Onitsha.