

\*HOMILY AT THE OPENING MASS OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR DIRECTORS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (NADRE)\*

Memorial of St. Agnes, Virgin and Martyr

Church of the Ascension, Bodija, Ibadan.

✓ Most Rev. Dr. Gabriel 'Leke Abegunrin

(Ably represented by his Chancellor),

✓ The Director of the Pastoral Affairs Department of the CSN,

✓ Very Rev. & Rev. Fathers,

✓ Consecrated Persons,

✓ Dear Catechists,

✓ Brothers and Sisters,

Glory to Jesus!

Conference Theme: "You Shall Have No Other God Before Me" (Exodus 20:3)

As we gather for this Eucharist to open our national conference, here in the Archdiocese of Ibadan, the Word of God and today's memorial converge with striking clarity. We celebrate the Memorial of St. Agnes, a young virgin and martyr, while the First Commandment resounds again in our ears: "You shall have no other god before me" (Exodus 20:3).

This commandment is not merely ancient law; it is a living question addressed to every age, and very pointedly to ours.

#### 1. New Idols in Old Clothing: The First Commandment Today

In the time of Moses, the danger was the worship of visible idols. In our own time, the idols are subtler but no less demanding. One of the most powerful among them is the digital world, not simply as technology, but as a formative culture that claims authority over truth, identity, and morality. The internet now teaches before the catechist arrives. It forms consciences before doctrine is explained. It rewards noise over wisdom and popularity over truth. In many ways, it has become a rival catechist—a competing "god" demanding attention, loyalty, and obedience. To therefore proclaim "You shall have no other god before me" today is to challenge this quiet enthronement of digital voices over divine revelation. It is to insist that Christ, not algorithms, remains Lord of conscience.

## 2. Jesus Watched: Healing on the Sabbath and the Digital Synagogue

In today's Gospel, Jesus enters the synagogue and meets a man with a withered hand. But another presence fills the room- hostile watchers. They observe Him, not in faith, but in suspicion, "to see whether He would heal on the Sabbath."

This scene is no longer confined to Scripture. The Church today stands in a global digital synagogue, constantly watched. Her ministers are scrutinised. Her teachings are clipped, distorted, and "dragged." Compassion is labelled extremism. Doctrine is branded intolerance. Yet Jesus does not negotiate with fear. He asks the decisive question:

"Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (Mark 3:4)

And in the face of silence, He heals.

Here lies our examination of conscience as Directors of Religious Education:

Do we still heal on the Sabbath, knowing the consequences? Or have we grown cautious, quiet, and comfortable, saying, "I do not want to be dragged; let the Church defend herself," forgetting that we are the Church?

## 3. David and the New Goliath: Catechesis as Courage

The digital world has become a new Goliath- towering, loud, intimidating, and seemingly invincible. Like Goliath, it mocks faith and instils fear. Many retreat into silence, paralysed by its size and influence. But David refused silence. He understood that when God's honour is at stake, neutrality is betrayal. He rejected Saul's armour and went forward with what he had- faith, clarity, and courage. For us, catechesis is that sling. Scripture, Tradition, sound doctrine, and moral clarity are our stones. The question before us is unavoidable:

- ✓ Are we sufficiently doing this work?
- ✓ Are we forming Catholics capable of discerning truth in the digital space?
- ✓ Or have we become spectators in a battle we were called to fight?

## 4. St. Agnes: Fidelity Without Fear

Today's memorial gives flesh to this challenge. St. Agnes was young, vulnerable, and surrounded by hostile powers. She was watched, threatened, and condemned. Yet she refused to place any other god before Christ- not power, not fear, not social approval, not even life itself. She did not negotiate fidelity to avoid consequences. She bore witness.

In a different key, we are asked to do the same. Not all are called to shed blood, but all are called to courage. St. Agnes reminds us that fidelity is never too costly when God is at stake.

## 5. Lumen Gentium and Our Identity as the Church

The Second Vatican Council, in Lumen Gentium, answers the crucial question: Who are we as the Church?

✓ We are the People of God

✓ The Body of Christ

✓ And the sacrament of salvation in the world.

This means the Church does not act apart from us. When we retreat, the Church retreats. When we speak with courage, the Church speaks. The devil seeks to undermine the Church precisely because she remains one of the last credible moral voices in a fractured world. But Christ has already assured us:

“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Victory is promised but fidelity is required.

Conclusion: Heal, Even When Watched

The man with the withered hand is before us today- in confused youths, wounded families, and distorted consciences formed online. The watchers are also present. Like Jesus, like David, like St. Agnes, we must choose.

My dear brothers and sisters, as Directors of Religious Education, we are not custodians of silence but servants of truth. Let us leave this Eucharist renewed in courage, grounded in sacramental life, and ready to heal, even when watched, even when criticised, even when dragged.

For we shall have no other god before Him.

May St. Agnes continue to intercede for us. Amen.

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