

“Behold the Handmaid of the Lord” Luke 1: 38b

Dear Akpana,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to share a few words with you as you plunge into the future. In a few days you will stand before the congregation of worshippers including parents, siblings, friends etc in St Anne’s Cathedral Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria to repeat our Lady’s fiat “*Behold the handmaid of the Lord*”. You have been dreaming of this for a while and I am glad your dreams are being fulfilled.

However, it is important to know that this is not the end of it all. It is only the beginning of what you cannot image from your wildest dreams. Life is full of surprises and disappointments, joys and sorrows, ups and downs. And guess what, you may even be tempted to give up and despair. What **IS** today may not be tomorrow. You will have challenges in the choices you have made and you will have opportunities to make other choices. You will encounter people because as humans we are social beings and interact with one another. The large family you come from and the extended family system in your culture speaks loudly to this. But you have to be open to variations because no two people are the same and culture is not only dynamic it siffers across the globe. You will encounter and embrace cultures that would shake your very existence and the faith you hold so dear today.

Hold fast to your biological family and do not abandon them because you got your existence through them. They will miss you a lot and would always yearn for you. Your parents are a treasure. Utilize every opportunity you have to be with them. You can never have another biological mother or father. If you missed the chance of being with them now that they are alive, you will have a life time of regrets. I hope you remember Sunny Ogbaraga’s song “*Sweet Mother I no go Forget You*”. You can have no truer description or picture of who a mother is than the words of that song. Remember, you cannot have another biological parent. Your siblings will yearn for you so find time to communicate and visit when possible. You are their up shoot and there is a bond between them and you that cannot be broken or down played.

The Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, the congregation of your choice is missionary. Be open to get out of yourself and your comfort zone to embrace diverse cultures, peoples and places. The world is a globe and you could be anywhere at any time. Remember your foundress Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker who left the comfort of England to embrace the poverty of Southern Nigeria, the harsh weather of tropical West Africa and the malaria that made West Africa the “Whiteman’s grave”. In her footsteps, you could be on mission to lands unimaginable where the winters could last for five to six months of the year and could get below 50 degrees. You will greatly miss the tropical sun you now take for granted and you will yearn for natural air and warmth

to refresh you. Remember that if there are humans surviving there, you too can survive. Do not dwell on the difficulties/discomforts but rejoice in the gift of life and the joy of living among humans like you. There are angels in human form in the world. Appreciate them and reciprocate good gestures if you can not initiate them yourself. Moreover, you will find soothing comfort in the Blessed Sacrament because "*It is lonely without the Blessed sacrament*" (Mother Foundress)

People are a gift from God and you will meet them on your way going up or coming down. Be kind to them and take each person as a unique individual made in the image and likeness of God and loved as they are. Appreciate them, accept them as they are, identify with them, try to understand their culture and be one with them. Listen to their stories because you may be the only listening ear sent their way. Along the way you may meet people who are poor, lonely, addicted and stripped of their personhood. No material things can satisfy them because their poverty/problem is not material. Do not deride them, associate with them and extend your ministry to them as your foundress would say "*Let us plunge into the deep, there are souls to save*". That is where the Lord waits for the Handmaid. Use every opportunity to serve and bring hope to others in conformity with the motto of your congregation "*Love and Service*". Remember to visit and bring a breath of fresh air to the short-ins and home bound. They are a blessing in disguise and a source of blessing to the younger generation like you. Their prayers are very effective. Include them in your ministry wherever you may be.

As a certified teacher you will be entrusted with children, the delight and pride of every family. Love and cherish them for "*to such as these belongs the Kingdom of God*". Be open to other ministries because you may be *sent* only to where you are needed. Accept the challenges of a new experience and grow in it. These provide invaluable avenues for personal growth and growth generally. It is when you are tested and tried that you can discover your worth and strength. You may even find yourself in a leadership position but remember that a leader is one who loves. A leader forgives hurts and holds nothing against anyone. Remember the scriptures "*Do not let the sun set in your anger*". See the person of Christ in every person under your leadership then you will have inner peace and loose no sleep at night because you will treat them as you would treat Christ and forgive without a second thought.

The joy of living in community is amazing. Therein you will draw strength and receive the support you need to carry on. It provides the empowering environment for your vowed life and ministry. Do not forget however that there are some grim moments. Do not dwell on these because they can cripple you. Move on and hold fast to what is helpful. Let love be your guiding principle for love is life giving and hate is deadly. Strive for the better gift LOVE

Expect persecutions because you are an intelligent smart person. People will want to outwit you by making things difficult or make up stories to bring you down or get you into trouble. Be calm and firm in your good resolve because the truth will save you and *“God’s strength will be sufficient onto you”*. Above all *Pray! Pray!! Pray!!! for these things can only be over come on your knees”*. (Mother Foundress)

Time flies and as scripture says “a thousand years are like yesterday, come and gone”. Avoid procrastination. Do what you can as soon as you are aware there is something to be done. Time waits for no one and the clock cannot be turned back. Procrastination has been the downfall of many and the devil’s tools to detract you from doing what you should do and grow in grace. Be alert and waste no time. Time lost can never be regained.

Remember your root and do not be over ambitious and pursue wealth. You never lacked the basic necessities when you were home with your family so be content with what is made available to you because you will never go wanting. Avoid competition for material things because materialism is a god for many. Be content and thankful for who you are and what you have and the Lord will always provide for you and you will be happy.

Akpana, life is a stage. Each person comes plays his/her part and exit for eternal reward. You will not be an exception. There are lots of things to learn and unlearn, opportunities for growth and to impact others. Be yourself, consistent in your resolve, hold fast to the one you have chosen to follow. Be open to challenges and do not be discouraged by difficulties. He will be there to receive you at the end of it all. Make Him your life’s companion. Begin everyday/activity with Him, end the day/activity with Him and DO NOT lose sight of Him. Be kind and loving to all and accept people as they are. Forgive and let go so that your spirit will not be held in bondage. Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament has multiple effect and sets you on the way to freedom and love. Enjoy your life and don’t lose any opportunity to grow in grace.

Your older self



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