

2014 CALL TO BAR SPEECH

AN ADDRESS BY CHIEF T.J. ONOMIGBO OKPOKO, OON, SAN, FCIArb., CHAIRMAN, THE BODY OF BENCHER AT THE CALL TO BAR CEREMONY AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE, ABUJA ON TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 25TH AND 26TH, 2014.

Protocol

Today is another historic day in the history of the Law Profession in Nigeria. At the end of this ceremony, Nigerians and Cameroonians, tested in character and learning by the Council of Legal Education will be admitted officially to the Nigerian Bar by the Body of Benchers.

Let me welcome the honourable Benchers, young and all who have come all the way from all parts of our vast country at great personal expense and discomfort, to honour the profession of Law and the new wigs who are to be admitted and called to the Bar at this ceremony. I thank Benchers for their demonstrated commitment to the noble profession of Law.

On behalf of the Body Benchers, I welcome all the parents, friends, guardians and well-wishers of each and every one of the candidates for call to the Bar today, for coming to grace and witness this Call Ceremony. To many of you, the memories of this historic event will remain with you and will not be forgotten any time soon. Let us sit down and watch and let us listen and hear in silence as the proceedings of the Call to Bar Ceremony of the most noble and most honourable profession in the world.

To the Council of Legal Education, its management and staff, and to the Body Benchers Secretariat, its management and staff, I say congratulation for your services to the legal profession. I have no doubt in my mind that working together as we have done in the past, we shall attain the required standard among the community of nations in the education and training for our Lawyers and in their performance. I congratulate for your hard work.

To the candidates who have applied to be called to the Bar, I congratulate you for having scaled through the Bar examinations conducted by the Council of Legal Education, the only statutory body responsible for the Legal education of those who want to become legal practitioners. As you

have seen from the results as released recently by the Council of Legal Education, it is not every candidate who sat for the Bar Examination who achieved the required level for a pass at the Bar final examination.

For those who did not make it this time around, all hope is not lost. The lesson to learn is that the secret of success at the Bar examination is hard work throughout your time at the Law School. There are no two ways about this: unless you work hard to pass the examination you cannot apply for Call to the Bar. Every candidate in an examination has only one result. Either the candidate passes or he fails. This is the rule. The Body of Benchers has no authority to shift the goal post for anyone.

To the lucky candidate who the Council of Legal Education has adjudged to have been successful in the 2013/2014 for final examination, today is a day of life in the law which cannot be forgotten.

Today, you are being transformed. You will gain entry into the true noble profession of Law and the company of honourable gentlemen.

The profession you are about to be admitted to is noble and honourable. The profession of Law is noble and honourable not because of members' wealth or the circumstances of their birth. Its appellation as a honourable and noble profession was won and earned by the honesty and strict adherence of its members to their self developed rules of professional ethics which has from ages past won the trust of members of the public. Those to be admitted into the profession have to be noble and honourable in public, in their private life and in their words and actions.

Every year in this country as in other countries, students study law and obtain a law decree to enable them become Lawyers or Legal Practitioners. Ask a dozen Law students what attracted them to the study of law. They will give you multiple reasons for their decision to study law. we can talk about what actuated our incoming new wigs in deciding to embark on studying Law but can hardly find a single answer.

The Council of Legal education responsible for training candidates in preparation to this day has presented its report to the Honourable Benchers, that you have been found to be qualified in character and learning. Benchers have been satisfied that each one of you is fit and proper to be admitted to the Nigerian Bar and so you have come forward to be called to the Bar.

Let me read the rules of the game:

As members of the only noble profession, there are ground rules to be observed by members of the profession - These are the rules of professional ethics which regulate the conduct of lawyers and the conduct of law

business by members of the profession. These rules have emerged over the years from the collective experience of members of the profession from all the civilised world where law and the rule of law is recognised prevails. These rules are not optional. They are not static. The current edition is in the laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004. Every one practising Lawyer must be abreast with the Rules of professional ethics. New wigs must make it their working companion.

The collective experience of law practitioners through all the generation in all civilised societies attest firmly that strict adherence to the rules of the profession is the most important foundation for societal acceptance of law as a noble profession and its practitioners as men of honour. It is obligatory that new wigs and members of the profession by their action or inaction enhance the honour of the law profession and the dignity of its members by their words and action whether in public or private life.

The new wigs came into this hall as ordinary law graduates. After the ceremony, you will each leave the Law as a legal practitioner and an honourable man or woman.

With your new status, you are potential leaders; a potential President, Governor or community leaders. Even your classmate from other disciplines will accord you that respect if you manifest by your action, the attributes of a gentleman of law and a respectable man of honor.

The conduct expected of a man of honor is not limited to the conducts imposed by the Law. Last week I saw on the AIT Network News, a man in flowing white robes scaling the fence of the National Assembly in an attempt to beat the Police barricade. In shock, I exclaimed this man cannot possibly be a lawyer because '*a gentleman does not jump fences*'.

You must rise and protect the appellation of 'gentleman' to your name as a member of the Honourable profession.

You must have heard of and known the Nigerian Bar Association. It is the organized body of Legal practitioners in Nigeria, membership of which is compulsory under the Legal Practitioners Acts. After today, you must proceed to introduce yourself to the branch of the Association where you live or practice Law. It is a matter of great honour to serve the Nigerian Bar Association. Participation in Bar activities is beneficial in every regard and every respect in the practice of law.

The practice of Law is not a game of hide and seek. A lawyer is a servant of justice. in her speech at the Valedictory Sitting of the Supreme Court in honour of the recently retired Chief Justice of Nigeria - chief Folake Solanke CON, SAN - The learned first female Senior Advocate of Nigeria said -

Our gathering here today reminds me of that profound judicial statement in *R v O. Connel* (1884) LR 1 2011 at 312 - per Cramton J to wit -

'This Court in which we sit is a temple of justice and the advocates of the Bar as well as the Bench are equally ministers in that temple. The object of all equally should be attainment of justice'.

As a minister in the temple of justice, you are an officer of the court which you must neither deceive nor mislead by your actions or inactions.

A Lawyer must accord respect to the Court and never engage any judge or magistrate in hot exchange of words or engage in what may appear to be a quarrell with adjudicators or colleagues.

The duty to respect the Court does not in any way prevent a Lawyer from presenting his client's case as best as he or she can legitimately do. A lawyer must be fearless but not rude to anyone. You must avoid involvement in any matter which may cause conflict of interest.

You must not allow greed or pursuit of quick money or material gain obstruct your duty to justice or your view of the rules of the Professional Ethics which are guides to a successful life at the Bar.

Money will be made in professional practice when it will. There is the old adage in many communities in our area which says that *'your portion of water in a running stream never passes you by; you can always take your portion of water in a running stream whenever you dip your cup in it'*.

Once more, I welcome you as the new wig to the law profession. I ask you to commit to heart the memorable 7 words from Magna Carta - the first known English written constitutional proclamation of the 14th century and it is this -

"UNTO NO ONE SHALL I SELL, OR DENY RIGHT OR JUSTICE."

Place these ancient words in your heart and live by them and the good Lord will bless and protect you as you embark in the practice of Law. This was how it was, this is how it is today and this is how it shall be.

DATED AT ABUJA THIS 25TH DAY OF NOVEMBER, 2014.

CHIEF T.J. ONOMIGBO OKPOKO, OON, SAN FCIArb.