

As you put on the Wig

*Alhaji Abdullahi Ibrahim, OFR, S.A.N.
Chairman, Body of Benchers*

Today marks yet, another historic occasion when our students who have successfully passed their Bar examinations are being admitted to the Nigerian Bar. I heartily congratulate each and everyone of you, your parents and guardians for this special achievement.

This must be one of your happiest moments, one in which you are filled with feelings of achievement, hopes and expectations, having now only one step to get you to the opening of the door to the fulfilment of your eager desires for a career in the legal profession. It is indeed a great achievement deserving of celebrations to the high heavens. But while you rejoice this achievement, you should however remember that that, this achievement, in a few moments from now will confer on you the membership of the learned and honourable profession of law, a profession which is rightly regarded as holding the key to societal ethics, norms and values. As you put on your wigs today, you come to the end of the first stage of your training, you will now begin the last leg of your journey into a noble profession which demands of its members the highest degree of good personal behaviour. I want to say that what you have learnt from the University and indeed the law school cannot make you a good lawyer without your working hard in practice and adopting the highest degree of conduct and etiquette.

A lawyer's work life is primarily based on what the law is. When he advises his client he does so based on law. When he sues on behalf of or defends his client such action is based on the provisions of law. Whatever the facts of a case are, they must fit into the provisions of the law before success can be expected. When he attends court he must be there at a given time save by other arrangement with the court. The argument in the court takes a certain pattern both in the High Courts and the Appeal Courts. Anything outside this pattern is unacceptable. A lawyer is therefore expected to live a disciplined life.

Good conduct has always been a condition precedent to the entry into the legal profession. Under the Legal Practitioners Act, a person shall not be entitled to be called to the Bar save in addition to other requirements, he satisfies the Body of Benchers that he is of good character. You have therefore by being here today satisfied one major requirement for becoming a lawyer. That is you have satisfied the Honourable Body of Benchers that you are of good character; your passing the prescribed examination alone would not have entitled you to a seat today in this hall

and at this ceremony. I therefore urge you all to maintain the personal standard of behaviour you have shown so far. You cannot and should not in the pursuit of your various endeavours do anything that would tarnish the image and integrity of the profession. The Body of Benchers and the Disciplinary Committee of the Bar are on the look out for offenders. Do not be one of them for the consequences are grave.

The legal profession emphasises good conduct both at the Bar and the Bench. This proper conduct must be maintained in and outside the court. Courtesy to the court is fundamental to good advocacy, courtesy to seniors is always expected. But it is disturbing to note that nowadays seniority does not seem to mean anything to many a young lawyer. He does not take his proper place in court even when he knows counsel who are more senior to him are in court. If allowed, he will like to call his case first even when he knows that by the ethics of the profession he should probably leave court last that day. Because he shows no respect to the court the collar he wears is brown instead of the snow white that it should be. Stripped shirts and jackets are seen as fashionable attires. All these must be seen as wrong behaviour which you are advised not to indulge in.

While in court the lawyer is regarded as an officer of the court who is expected to assist the court in doing justice in the matter before it. His duty therefore is not to win a case at all means. This therefore indicates that in the defence of his client's case a lawyer is expected to be honest both in his dealings with the court and indeed his colleague. He must be able to tell the client the truth about the client's case. He is as an officer of the court expected to settle a matter where the interest of his client demands. A case must not be fought to a "bitter end" simply because that is the only way that the full professional fee will be paid by the client. The rules of court encourage settlement of cases and judges are expected to make the lawyers see the need to do so.

You must quickly develop confidence in your ability as it is by so doing that you create confidence in your client. To possess such confidence you must imbibe the desire for hard work and must maintain strong work ethics. It is only through hard work that you can maintain your knowledge of the general principles of the law which you must develop by further reading virtually on daily basis. There are few practising lawyers that I know who are good club members or play tennis every afternoon. You are likely not to have the time.

Your progress in the profession will largely be based on your honesty and integrity. Those before you necessarily exhibited these qualities and left for you a respected profession. You cannot become a big name in the profession without these qualities.

In the course of your careers you will be confronted with various temptations and influences, particularly in our present economic

circumstances. As I said earlier on, your prosperity depends on your steadfastness to the virtues of honesty and integrity in the conduct of your affairs both within and outside the law. You must therefore guard against any behaviour that will bring our profession into disrepute. If you succeed in the profession and it is my prayers that you do, do not let it be said of you that you are a lucky person but that you deserve success because of hard work and other attributes.

The Bar Association both at the local and national level has a duty to insist on good conduct on the part of lawyers. The association's role in my view, goes beyond fighting the police for arresting a colleague or going on strike because of the conduct of a judge or a government policy which is disliked. It has a duty to sanitise the community of lawyers, if it fails in this duty the legal profession and indeed lawyers will lose respect, and the proper estimation in public view. The disciplinary committee of the Bar must be revived urgently and urged to work towards clearing the backlog of disciplinary cases before the committee. Now that the National Executive of the Bar seems to work with some harmony this is the time to enforce discipline.

Ladies and gentlemen, aspirants, permit me to mention another issue which appears to be of grave concern in the profession. We all talk about it but do nothing in its regard. As a young practitioner I was taught that counsel must not take over a matter being handled by a colleague without first of all finding out from the colleague in writing, if he could do so, having been approached by a client. There are good reasons for this practice which is supported by our code of conduct. I wonder if this is practised by many of us now. It is not surprising that a case is transferred nowadays from one counsel to another without consultation. I say to you that you must keep to the ethics of our profession when eventually, as you will soon God willing, join the profession. Let us keep to the well known norms of our profession. What honour does our going outside them bring to the profession? None in my opinion.

There are some positive things that we can do to bring honour and prestige to ourselves and the profession. One of such things is investing the little we now earn in the profession. Our library should take a prominent place in our expenditure ladder. We also need to invest more of our time in the practice. We should not because of the present difficult times become part-time legal practitioners, pursuing just anything that will bring succour. By so investing we learn more the art of practising our profession, we become more knowledgeable and will not invite the situation that necessitated the repealed decree that forbade the formation of a practice by counsel who was less than five years at the Bar and the rule of practice that forbade appearance of counsel of less than seven years at the Bar from appearing in certain courts.

As you go out into the world know that it may not always be a bed of roses. Things may become difficult at times but I pray that if difficulties do arise, they do not last. I congratulate you once again and I felicitate with you, your parents and guardians. I am happy that the anxious long waiting years at the University and the law school are now over. I welcome you to the fold. May God bless all of us (Amen).