

VALEDICTORY SPEECH DELIVERED BY HON. JUSTICE I.U. BELLO, FNIALS

CHIEF JUDGE , HIGH COURT OF THE FCT AT A SPECIAL COURT SESSION

HELD IN HIS HONOUR ON 5TH JANUARY 2021

I am most grateful and feel really honoured for the kind and generous words spoken about me by all the speakers. I am today discharging my last judicial function by presiding over this court session. Today marks the end of a career which has spanned a period of 35 years from when I was appointed a Magistrate in 1985. Considering that the current life expectancy in Nigeria is about 55 years and that I have spent over half of that time on the bench, I have reasons to thank Allah for His graciousness unto me. I have also had the good fortune, to have had a wonderful family, outstanding teachers, priceless friends and colleagues both at the Bar and on the Bench, who offered me their invaluable suggestions at the right time and right place. I will come back to this later.

At this opportune moment, I look back at my life as a student, lawyer, magistrate, Judge and finally Chief Judge. A lot have been said about my profile as such, I will not bore you with those details. Suffice to mention however that the expectations of a good judge are neither mysterious nor cryptic. They have remained the same for thousands of years and still abide to this day. Socrates captured this wisely when he described that a good judge is, ***"to hear courteously, to answer wisely, to consider soberly, and to decide impartially."*** The job also comes with certain qualities such as insight, courage, firmness, fairness, alertness, virtuousness and the gifts of sympathy and wisdom. In my sojourn on the bench, I had this in my mind and I tried as much as possible to live out those qualities. I grew to become a Chief Judge, a position that must come with the added qualities of patience and administrative acumen. I am so thankful to Almighty Allah, for giving me opportunity to join this dedicated, forward looking and highly respected profession and for bringing me to the peak.

In a democratic country like Nigeria the key attribute of the judiciary must be its impartiality. In several cases, I have seen the court take decisions against the state as well for the achievement of the ends of justice. I know this well because I have delivered some myself. The position of a judge is an exalted one which accords the holder great respect by all and sundry. He is expected to assert his judicial freedom and impartiality and to use all his skills to protect the rights of the individual against lawlessness, arbitrariness or anything that distorts good order and societal stability. I can state determinedly that in today's world just as it was when I ventured into this profession kindness and compassion are essential virtues and I have striven to always keep that in my mind while discharging my duties. I also solemnly accept as true the saying that the greatest strength of the judiciary is the trust, reliance and faith of the people in it. On my part, during my very active years as a judge which ends today, I had lived up to the expectation of a Judge and I have done the needful to build

public confidence and trust. I had always kept in mind the words spoken in the glorious Quran that ;

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a Better Protector to both (than you). So follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you may avoid justice, and if you distort your witness or refuse to give it, verily, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do (Surah Àn- Nisa 135)”.

Additionally, I lived with the immortal word of Mahatma Gandhi ...

“Let the first act of every morning be to make the following resolve for the day

-I shall not fear anyone on earth

-I shall fear only God

-I shall not bear ill will towards anyone

-I shall not submit to injustice from anyone

-I shall conquer untruth by truth and in resisting untruth, I shall put up with all suffering..."

I am hanging my robes with the satisfaction that I discharged my duties in fear of God and to the solemn oath I had taken to do justice without fear or favour, affection or ill will.

During this period I spent in the system, I have witnessed exciting courtroom battles as well as the joys and the pain radiated by litigants, who seek to approach the court, to plead their case in the arduous quest for justice. I would like to say that whatever I could do, as part of my duty and responsibility as a Judge I did in accordance with my oath of office. My feelings at this moment and the thoughts that follow oscillate from nostalgia and gratitude, to being overwhelmed and

humbled, as I reflect upon the last 35 years I spent on the bench at different levels. If my humble efforts, have in any degree, contributed to the preservation of justice and upholding of the rule of law, I believe, that I too, have been rewarded by the honour and confidence you all have instilled in me.

“No man is an Island, entire of it self; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main”; so did John Donne say in 1624. I came to appreciate this early as various people have been part of the story of my life. Shaping and molding me into what I am today. Others have assisted me in the discharge of both my judicial duties and administrative functions and to all, I am eternally grateful.

To begin with, I have had a lovely and cordial period of interaction with all my brothers and colleagues, all of whom I must confess are people of great insight, knowledge and a valuable source of inspiration. I have found each of you so much ingrained with care and affection, and sharing wonderful thoughts and lighter moments. In general, I have

enjoyed the tremendous cooperation of all of you, my brother Judges and other heads of court in all my endeavors in the discharge of my administrative and judicial functions. We were one big, happy and cohesive family where love flowed in abundance and affection overcame strife which gave me the courage and determination to carry on my work.

Here, I wish to place on record my gratitude, to all my staff who have remained with me , tolerated me and my shortcomings some for as much as 20 years. They have all been supportive in the course of my work but beyond that they have shown understanding and sometimes, they have had to bear with my seldom volatile outbursts. They have made great sacrifices for me personally and by extension the system in general. They have all been dedicated, zealous, sincere and hardworking, providing great services to me and to the court. I take this opportunity to thank each one of them from the bottom of my heart.

Now coming to my family members whom I think have suffered the most from my periods of absence due to official duties or from whom I may have been distant due to the pressure of work. Though long gone, it is difficult to forget the lessons my parents taught me in discipline, hard work, respect and tolerance. They brought me up to be fair and firm but humble and compassionate. I firmly believe that the discipline they instilled in me laid in me the foundation for my entire career which with utmost faith I followed till today. I had the fullest cooperation from my wives and children who were able to make the fine distinction between work and family and took the decision never to interfere in my judicial functions.

As Chief Judge, I had the privilege of interacting closely with various agencies, departments and ministries of government. The focus of our interactions was never personal but rather, the improvement of justice delivery. Of all these bodies, I must single out some whose impact on me as a person and the court as an institution was profound. The

Ministry of Justice was one of such ministries. Under the stewardship of Abubakar Malami, SAN, as Attorney General and Minister for Justice the court and I have enjoyed tremendous support from you and the ministry. I thank you for all your efforts to see that institutions in the justice sector work as one through your support to the Administration of Criminal Justice Monitoring Committee and other initiatives such as the creation of a Department for Correctional Service Reforms. I can also never forget how you gave everything to ensure that I succeeded in my national assignment as Chairman of the Presidential Committee on Correctional Service Reforms and Decongestion. I recall with appreciation how, on a number of occasions you traveled with the Committee on visits to Correctional Centers in various states. I am not unmindful that some of these journeys came at great personal sacrifice in view of so many other competing priorities. I further recognize the committee's achievements as a best practice of cooperation with the Ministry under your able leadership during the last few years. I would like to publicly acknowledge the professionalism shown by your good

self, which ensured implementation of most of the Committee's projected activities, including several stakeholder engagements, the development of a Practice Direction on Custodial and Non -Custodial Sentencing for Courts in the FCT and the construction of a model skill acquisition center for inmates at the keffi Correctional Center.

Secondly, I want to place on the record that our "governor", the Minister of the FCT, Muhhamed Musa Bello has been a great host. From the period I assumed office as Chief Judge, the Hon. Minister has never relented in providing the necessary support to the court whenever we came calling. The Hon. Minister's ardor for justice is palpable as we can see from his desire to have a "women and child cente" in the FCT. This is a discussion we have had severally and I hope this dream is fulfilled before the end of your tenure as minister.

Let me take the opportunity to convey my admiration to the Hon. Minister for Interior, Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola whose timely assistance and cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, the Court and

the Presidential Committee is leading to far reaching reforms one of which is the passage of the Correctional Service Act 2020. This Act has revolutionized the Nigeria Correctional Service and history will surely make a positive note of this in your honour.

As I noted earlier, so many other agencies of government played vital parts in the period of my stewardship and as such, I say a big thank you to the Police, The Inspector General Mr. Mohammed Adamu, and his men and all other prosecutorial agencies including the EFCC, ICPC and NAPTIP. I remain grateful for your vigilance and the way you conducted yourselves in our courtrooms and your support to me.

On the same tangent, the FCT Commissioner of Police Mr. Bala Ciroma has been extremely supportive of some of the reform initiatives that began during my tenure. We engaged efficiently when we started visitation of Centers of Detention under Sec. 34 of ACJA(2015)and the reception we got from most of the Police Station were welcoming. This

included granting our magistrates access to even the SARS detention facilities before the scrapping of that unit.

I wish to specially recognize our development partners, who have been very helpful in funding some of the reforms embarked upon during my tenure. Of particular note is the Office of the Rule of Law Advisor to the Vice President, ROLAC which is jointly funded by the European Union and the British council, Partners West Africa, the Center for Socio-Legal Studies, the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal studies and Acorn. I thank you all for the unwavering support and for forging partnerships that has given rise to some of the significant outputs and milestones I have achieved.

As I appreciate all our past interactions on behalf of my successor and the court as a whole, I hope these interactions will continue both at the professional and personal levels.

I also acknowledge those that are very close to my heart. I recall as a young student, I acted out the part of the Judge in Olu Olagoke's book "The Incorruptible Judge". The play tried to portray that a judge should be a judge in title and in character. Little did I know that the part I played would lay the foundation for what I was to become in life. One man who saw this was Mr. Joshua Bityong. He was my English teacher who after that play insisted I must become a lawyer and in my entire interaction with him after then which was fatherly and inspiring, he did everything to encourage and to guide me. I am glad that he lived to see what I became. I will forever owe him a depth of gratitude.

Also I must specially mention Honourable Justice M.L. Uwais, GCON, JSC (RTD) and former Chief Justice of Nigeria. I recall that as a young Magistrate, I got his Lordship's telephone number. He was about to become the chief justice at that time, I gathered some courage, and I picked up my analogue phone and dialed that number. He answered directly in the most humble and amiable manner and listened patiently

to my request. That interaction laid the foundation of my movement to the High Court after a stint at the Supreme Court. After then and till date, His Lordship has been a father in all aspects of my life both public and private. Words alone cannot express my feeling of appreciation. I am glad that the young man you gave a chance to thread in your footsteps is today bowing out happy and fulfilled. Thank you so much sir I hope I made you proud. From you I have come to learn and appreciate what humbleness and simplicity mean. Hon. Jus. M.L. Uwais is indeed a man of simplicity to a fault.

Of blessed memory and great impact in my life too is Justice Shehu Usman Muhammad JSC (RTD) and former Chief Judge of Kaduna State. His lordship's particular interest in my career and the mentorship role he played has also been of tremendous impact. One that I can never forget. One fundamental lesson I learnt in my relationship with his lordship is to always have a listening ear even for your subordinates. This lesson has remained invaluable.

In life you develop friendships. But there is a friend who may stick closer than a brother. That in summary, is my relationship with Alhaji Munir Ja'afaru MNI, OFR (Yeriman Zazzau). Words cannot express how grateful I am for your kindness and generosity over the years of our togetherness. He represents humility, large heart, confidant and selflessness. A very close friend of mine often says "Yerima seems to pamper you as a father does to his son, that is why you are always running to zaria." I will smile and say no one can understand the extent of our relationship, it is built on trust and sincerity and indeed great concern for one another. Allan Cohen once said, "Appreciation is the highest form of prayer, for it acknowledges the presence of good wherever you shine the light of your thankful thoughts." Thank you so much for being there for me through thick and thin. I join you to pray that all your desires are fulfilled just as you helped me in mine.

I have come to the difficult part. That is to say goodbye. It is sad but we must realize that moving on with the rest of our lives starts with a goodbye. But can I really say good bye when wherever I go or you all

will be, you all will be in my heart? Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end so we all look forward to a new dawn. I only urge as I leave that this institution working hand in glove with the Bar would continue to do its best to ensure that the law is duly administered according to our mandate as Judges and in line with the Nigerian Constitution. There might be differences but our greatest success lies in working together. As I continue to encourage the Bar and the bench to work together, an interesting story from the world of porcupines holds a great lesson for all of us.

“The story goes that it was a particularly harrowing time in porcupine land. The winter was severe, and the porcupines were finding it difficult to survive, and freezing to death. That's when the porcupines decided to meet and agree on a course of action.

As they got together to discuss their survival strategy, they discovered that just by being close to each other they were

able to feel warmer and protect each other. Being closeted together meant that their bodies generated heat which helped keep everybody warm. So they found they could survive the cold by just staying together.

But there was a problem. As they got closer to each other, they found their quills would poke and hurt. Feeling the discomfort, some porcupines decided to avoid the pain and moved away. But as they went out, the cold got them and they died.

Soon better sense prevailed, and the porcupines realised it was better to stay together and survive rather than go out on their own and die. Getting poked by the quills seemed like a small price to pay for survival.” (A life lesson from porcupines - RediffGetahead)

Learning from the story, to forge the justice sector of our dreams, we as gatekeepers should continue to work together no matter the

differences there might be. The best parting gift I can get is the assurance that the synergy and cohesion which presently exists between the Bar and Bench continues to abide.

Without doubt, anywhere I go, I carry with me the sweet memories of this High Court which I will always treasure and the experience gained from my years of working here. I have spent some time on the bench and I was not as matured when I started as I am now. So, if at all, at any point of time, I was hard on any lawyer I want you to appreciate that it wasn't intentionally meant to embarrass or mortify but only in the interest of the institution did I act, to push counsel either to do what is right or to meet our own deadlines set by the NJC and not otherwise. And to my brothers and those I interacted closely with, if I had offended anybody at any time, please forgive me for my act of indiscretion. It was never intentional. I hope that those of us who have become well acquainted over the years will be able to remain in touch

not just by the use of technology but by visits where and when possible.

I must specifically express my gratitude to Hon. Jus. Salisu Garba, a classmate from secondary school, a friend, brother and family member who, any moment from now would be sworn in by the Hon. Chief Justice of Nigeria , to enable him oversee this jurisdiction pending the approval of his acting appointment as head of this court. I thank you for taking the pains to carefully present the achievements in relevance to the various innovations put in place during my almost six years as the Chief Judge of this Court, all in pursuit of excellence in the justice delivery system. Reasons of modesty would certainly not allow me to talk in the manner he eloquently did in bringing to light those achievements. I am grateful. On a lighter note, anytime I close my eyes I see my lord Justice Garba in the usual shorts we used while at secondary school. I will certainly miss the company of such a gentleman.

In the final analysis, I look back with satisfaction, look forward with hope, look up with confidence and appreciate what Allah has done for me secretly and openly. I express my gratitude for all your support and outpouring of well wishes. They mean a great deal to me. As I take off my robe to confine it to the hanger of my wardrobe, I pray that you and your families will continue to enjoy good health and heaven's bountiful blessings.

This is my ruling. No order as to cost.

