Greetings
My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may I take this blessing on behalf of Hoima Catholic Diocese, and indeed the entire Uganda Episcopal Conference to welcome you pilgrims to Namugongo Martyrs shrine for the celebration of the Uganda Martyrs’ Day in this year of our Lord 2017. We have come from many corners of the world to praise and thank the Almighty God, Father of our ancestors in faith, for the gift of the Uganda Martyrs! You are most welcome. May the Holy Spirit who strengthened the martyrs to stand firm in the Christian faith, fill all of us with faithfulness and courage to live as renewed disciples of Jesus Christ.

Why are we here today?
‘Listen, Oh Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ (Deut. 6:4-5). Secondly, ‘You must love your neighbor as yourself’ (Mk 12:30). We are here today to renew our commitment to this most important law, as we draw memorable experiences in martyrdom. The first reading that was taken from Prophet Daniel (Dan. 3:8ff), presents to us the challenge of living the virtues of faith, hope and love of God as our Creator and Father. The text has presented the three friends of God; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as courageous men who refused to betray their faith in God, and for their firm commitment, they were accused of disobeying king Nebuchadnezzar. The king had ordered them to venerate a gold statue, something we can compare in our times to a sack full of billions of shillings or indeed any sort of material or immaterial vanity. Yes, the faithful friends of God stood firm amidst the trials and tribulations that surrounded them.
The lesson learnt from this text has inspired our theme for this year’s pilgrimage: ‘Stand firm in the faith that you have been taught’ (Col 2:7). The Apostle is prayerfully concerned about the life of the young church in Colosse. It is surrounded by self-styled people with persuasive arguments, likely to cause the believers drift from the teachings of Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life, (Jn 14:6). Therefore, the theme helps us to meditate on a chain-link of events of faithful courage, found in the men and women who have proved their fundamental option for doing the will of God. In fact, it is this life of virtuous courage that has been celebrated from the Old Testament, through the early church, right on to our own days.

Jesus in the Gospel text reveals to the disciples and indeed all of us pilgrims that: ‘You are the salt of the earth. … ‘You are the light to the world’, (Mat. 5:13ff). Now, there are great implications for being such important elements in daily Christian life. We know that salt adds flavor to food and preserves it. But the people of old Palestine also applied salt to newly born babies to give them strength and protection from infection, and evil spirits. With this traditional understanding, Jesus challenges you and me to be salt to one another, and indeed to all peoples of God. We do so by upholding and practicing our Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity wherever we are.

My brothers and sisters, our Christian commitment and mission therefore is to guard against destructive forces within ourselves as individuals and within our societies; for example, let us examine our attitudes towards individualism, selfishness, greed, corruption, destruction to the environment and everything that militates against God’s natural law. We are challenged to be considerate and serviceable.
In the aspect of light, the Lord expects us to lead the world in virtue and wisdom. By word and example let each one of us positively contribute to the growth of every person, and whole communities. Rejoice in the Christian style of life, and therefore sustain a human vision that is enlightened by the Gospel. Let us not grow tired in defending the weak, the vulnerable, and the voiceless natural environment. Put your light on a stand so that it will shine for all to see …. and praise your heavenly Father.’ (Mt 6:16).

The Uganda martyrs whose Christian commitment we are celebrating today was guided when they remained focused on him who is the light of the world. The spiritual fathers who nurtured them; namely, Father, Lourdel Mapeera and Brother Amans (Missionaries of Africa) were men who greatly believed in doing the will of God, and the implementation of the mission mandated by the Lord, Jesus Christ. This seedling assembly loved God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength to the extent of offering their lives when challenged to falter. They were zealous to share their experience of the living Saviour even where it resulted in severe punishment, and loss of the king’s privileges.

The martyrs while still catechumens would forego sleep at night so that they could go to the missionaries to learn catechism lessons. Consequently, they were grounded in the foundation of faith, and of witnessing to Christ as brothers and sisters. There is documented evidence that the Christian community in Mityana regularly sent one of the catechumens to Kampala, to attend Father Mapeera’s
catechism lessons, learn them by heart and then return to the community to share what he had learnt! That kind of zeal and strategic determination to follow Jesus by the Martyrs certainly teach us a lot about what it means to love God above all things.

Secondly, the Uganda Martyrs were ordinary people, but with admirable human qualities; they were kind, loving, humble, courageous and focused on rendering service for the common good. And, because of these wonderful qualities, and the high sense of responsibility, they were given leadership positions in the palace of the Kabaka.

They, like us today, had trials and temptations. Sometimes they faced situations whereby they had to choose between Christian values and personal, selfish goals. There was every possibility for them to lose track of the gospel teachings, and falter in the candid learning they had received from the missionaries. But they gave no chance to complacency; to think that their saltiness would not melt away when flooded with problems in life. Neither did they assume that their light of faith could never be blown off in the stormy winds of modern life. Therefore, they did not dim the light, remained focused on Christ, prayed and stood firm in the faith without wavering. .. No turning back!

Beloved brothers and sisters, we once again appeal to your sustained commitment to live lives inspired by the gospel of Jesus Christ. I invite each of you to pray to be faithful witnesses of the great commandment. Moreover, we are happy to inform you that the two missionaries, Fr. Lourdel and Bro. Amans were officially presented last November to Mother Church, requesting her to formally start the process of their beatification and eventual
canonization. Let us jointly call upon the Uganda Martyrs to intercede with us; that those who bore and nurtured them spiritually through their example, teaching and the waters of Baptism, may one day be beatified and canonized.

**Finally,** allow me to sincerely thank all of you who have contributed to the success of this year’s pilgrimage. We heartily acknowledge the contribution of all of you; families and individual persons, the government of Uganda, and the various companies. May the Almighty God reward you most abundantly. We pray and wish you journey mercies that you may safely travel back home. God bless you all.