



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF SENEGAL,
MAURITANIA, GUINEA-BISSAU AND CAPO VERDE
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT***

Monday, 20 February 2006

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I am pleased to welcome you when you are making your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles, to strengthen your communion with the Successor of Peter and to consolidate the bonds of faith and unity between your particular Churches and the Church of Rome, as well as with the entire ecclesial body.

I thank Bishop Jean-Noël Diouf of Tambacounda, President of your Episcopal Conference, for presenting the situation of the Church in your region. Through you, Pastors of the Church in Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, I join in spirit and in prayer the peoples for whom you have pastoral responsibility. May God bless the artisans of peace and brotherhood in your Countries who are building relations of trust and mutual support between human and religious communities.

The human and ecclesial situations in your particular Churches are very different, which sometimes makes it difficult to harmonize your work as Pastors. To carry out the mission you have received from the Lord and to give it ever greater apostolic fruitfulness, bonds of effective communion remain essential. Thus, through your participation in the meetings of your Bishops' Conference, not only do you find support in carrying out your episcopal ministry but you also concretely show that the Bishop is not a man on his own, for he is always and continually with the one whom the Lord has chosen as Successor of Peter and with his Brother Bishops.

By journeying on with his people, the Bishop must inspire, guide and coordinate evangelizing

action, so that faith may develop and spread among people. In this perspective, the Gospel must be firmly rooted in your peoples' culture. The reversion to certain traditional religious practices that you have sometimes noted in Christians must be an incentive to seek the appropriate means to revive and strengthen their faith in the light of the Gospel, and to reinforce the theological foundations of your particular Churches while drawing from the best of the African identity.

Indeed, Christians must not feel that with Baptism they are excluded from the life of their people or their family, but must continue to live in full harmony with the commitments they have taken on; however, from that time this necessarily entails a break with the habits and practices of their former lives, for the Gospel is a gift given to them from on high.

To adhere faithfully to one's baptismal commitments each person must have a sound formation in the faith in order to cope with new phenomena in contemporary life, such as the spread of urbanization, the idleness of many young people and every kind of material seduction in which ideas from every horizon exert their influence.

The abridged *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* now provides the faithful with a renewed and reliable synthesis of the truths of the faith of the Catholic Church, enabling each person to make clear gestures in conformity with his or her Christian commitment.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, in this difficult task of evangelization, your priests are generous collaborators whom I cordially encourage in their apostolic tasks. I firmly hope that their initial and continuing formation will make them humanly and spiritually balanced men capable of responding to the challenges that face them, in both their pastoral and personal life.

In addition, while giving formation the human and intellectual importance to which it is entitled, you should make the effort to give priests a sound spiritual formation in order to reinforce their life of intimacy with God in prayer and contemplation and enable them to discern the Lord's presence and action in those who are entrusted to their pastoral care.

To the extent that they have an authentic personal experience of Christ, they will be able to accept generously the requirement of the gift of themselves to God and to others and will give themselves in the humble and disinterested service of charity.

To foster harmony in the Church and to contribute to her missionary dynamism, I hope that the members of Institutes of Consecrated Life, whose constant service to the mission in your Dioceses I acknowledge with gratitude, will cultivate relations of trust and collaboration with Pastors and will live in deep communion, not only within each community but also with the diocesan and universal Church. May each Institute, faithful to its specific vocation, always show that its activities are first and foremost an expression of faith in God's love, and that it is by instilling this love in the heart of life that the Institute truly responds to human needs!

One of the tasks through which the Church in your region most visibly expresses love of neighbour is her involvement with a view to social development. Many ecclesial structures enable your communities to serve the poorest of the poor effectively, a sign of their awareness that love of neighbour, rooted in love of God, is constitutive of Christian life. So it is that "the entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 19). However, Christianity must not be reduced to a purely human wisdom or confused with a social service, for it is also a spiritual service.

Nor, for disciples of Christ, can the exercise of charity be a means of engaging in proselytism, because love is free (cf. *ibid.*, n. 31). You often serve human beings in collaboration with men and women who do not share the Christian faith, especially Muslims. Thus, the efforts made for an encounter in truth of believers of different religious traditions contributes to achieving in practice the authentic good of individuals and of society. It is indispensable to increasingly deepen brotherly relations between the communities in order to encourage a harmonious social development, recognizing the dignity of each person and enabling everyone to practice their religion freely.

This task of encouraging the harmonious development of society is particularly urgent in Guinea Bissau, whose population, among many tensions and rifts, still awaits the establishment of proper political and administrative structures and the reinforcement of their activities and functions at the service of a society where all can be builders of a common project.

I know that the local Church is on the front line in promoting dialogue and cooperation among all the members of the Nation; beloved Pastors, by words illumined by faith, by a constant witness of fidelity to the Gospel and by generous pastoral service, may you continue to be reliable reference points and guides for all your fellow citizens.

I now extend my gaze to the various Countries and I see that one of the pastoral priorities of your Dioceses is the Christian family; and rightly so! Without it, there would be no basic unity of life nor the construction of that "Family of God", with which the Church on your Continent identifies and which it proposed to be at the Synodal Assembly in 1994. The Church cannot be considered to be truly integrated or embodied until the Christian ideal of family life has taken root in the heart of the African people.

The way to all this does not pass through changes that aim to subvert the central nucleus of the Church's teaching on the sacraments and on the family. Rather, it passes through the radical fidelity of spouses to the new life they have embraced in Baptism and the redirection to the Gospel of Jesus Christ of traditional African marriage, an important factor in the local cultures. These, to reach the highest possible standard, are in need of the encounter with Christ; but he too awaits this encounter so that the event of the Incarnation may reach its fullness, giving the "measure

of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4: 13) to the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

The Church, in taking on the values of the different cultures, becomes that Bride adorned with her jewels of whom the Prophet Isaiah speaks (cf. Is 61: 10). Thus, I am grateful to you, dear Dioceses of this Bishops' Conference. Deck yourselves in your best jewels for Christ the Lord!

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, as we come to the end of our Meeting, I entrust each of your diocesan communities to the Virgin Mary, Queen of Africa. Take back to the priests, the men and women religious, the catechists and all the lay faithful of your Dioceses the warm greeting of the Pope and his encouragement. May God grant that they will all be faithful witnesses of his love for human-kind! I very willingly impart to you all an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.

© Copyright 2006 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana