



The Holy See

*ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF CONGO
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT
Friday, 19 October 2007*

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

I am happy to welcome you who have received from the Lord the responsibility of being Pastors of God's People in the Republic of the Congo. I hope that our meeting, an expression of communion with the Successor of Peter, may also be a source of increasingly intense communion between you and your diocesan Churches, filling you with confidence and encouraging you to persevere in the proclamation of the Gospel. I thank Bishop Louis Portella Mbuyu of Kinkala, President of your Episcopal Conference, for his report on the Church's situation in the Republic of the Congo. Through you, I cordially greet the priests, deacons, men and women religious, catechists and lay faithful of your Dioceses who have often expressed their attachment to Christ and their solidarity with their brethren in the trials of your Country's recent history; I invite them, together with all people of good will, to continue to be tireless artisans of justice and peace.

Your Bishops' Conference does not cease to awaken consciences and strengthen their will, making a specific and practical contribution to establishing peace and reconciliation in the Country. I therefore call Christians and the entire population of the Country to open up paths of reconciliation so that ethnic and social differences, lived in respect and mutual love, may become a common treasure rather than a cause of division.

Your quinquennial reports mention the urgent need to develop a true missionary dynamism in your local Churches. The Church cannot shirk this essential mission that invites her to comply with the fundamental need to be consistent and to harmonize faith and ethical norms. To evangelize in truth and depth, it is vital to become ever more faithful and credible witnesses of Christ. This eminent responsibility is incumbent upon you in particular. Remain "men of God", present in your Dioceses beside your priests, concerned above all to proclaim the Gospel, drawing from your

intimacy with Christ the strength to weave stronger and stronger bonds of brotherhood and unity among yourselves and with everyone. This requirement also concerns the Bishops' Conference, increasingly called to be a privileged place of communion and also of fraternal life, and to make a concerted effort with common projects. This approach will yield abundant fruit.

With real missionary concern to build the Church-Family, your pastoral action should rely on *living ecclesial communities*. As special places for the proclamation of the Gospel and the practice of charity, particularly for the poorest of the poor, these communities put into practice a pastoral approach of closeness and thus constitute a powerful bastion against the sects. I invite you to devote attentive care to the initial and continuing Christian formation of the faithful so that they may know the Christian mystery and live on it, supported by the reading of Scripture and the sacramental life. Thus, they will discover the riches of their baptismal vocation and the value of their Christian commitments in accordance with ethical principles and with a view to an ever more active presence in society. I thank those involved in the formation of lay people, in particular catechists and their families who are a precious help in evangelization. I hope that the appropriate structures of formation will be made available to them so that they may carry out their important role successfully.

Convey the Pope's encouragement to your priests. It is your task to support them, calling them to lead, in full communion with you and in a true spirit of service to Christ and the Christian community, an ever more dignified and holy existence based on a profound spiritual life and emotional maturity lived in celibacy, through which, with the grace of the Spirit and the free response of their own will, they offer their love and solicitude totally to Jesus Christ and to the Church (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 44). By being close to your priests, you yourselves will be examples of priestly life and will help them to become ever more keenly aware of the priestly brotherhood in which Ordination to the priesthood has established them. I also appeal to the numerous Congolese priests living abroad to consider seriously the pastoral needs of their Dioceses and to make the necessary decisions in response to the pressing appeals of their diocesan Churches.

I am delighted that you are planning to hold an in-depth reflection on priestly ministry in the near future. Your intention is to propose to priests and seminarians an existence as diocesan priests rooted in a strong spiritual life that corresponds to the demands of configuration to Jesus Christ, Head and Servant of the Church, and is based on a love for the mission and a life in conformity with the commitments of Ordination. It is through teaching and behaviour, as I have previously had the opportunity to emphasize, that "faith must be displayed in an irreproachable manner".

The tangibly dwindling number of canonical marriages is a real challenge that weighs upon the family, which is indispensable for the stability of the social framework, as is well known. Civil legislation, the undermining of the family structure and the powerful influence of certain traditional practices, especially the exorbitant cost of dowries, are truly obstacles that prevent young people

from committing themselves to marriage. An in-depth pastoral reflection is called for in order to foster the dignity of Christian marriage, which is a reflection and realization of Christ's love for his Church. It is important to help couples acquire the human and spiritual maturity they need to assume responsibly their mission as Christian spouses and parents, and to remind them that their love is unique and indissoluble and that marriage contributes to the full realization of their human and Christian vocation.

May the Church continue to play her prophetic role at the service of all the Country's inhabitants, particularly those who are the poorest and without a voice, revealing his or her dignity to each one and offering them God's love fully revealed in Jesus Christ! "Love is the light - and in the end, the only light - that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 39). Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, Star of Evangelization, I gladly grant my Apostolic Blessing to you and to your diocesan communities.

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