



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO AFRICA

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Kumasi (Ghana), 9 May 1980

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. Today is a day of great joy, and I have looked forward to this day for a long time. I have wanted to come and tell the catechists how much I love them, how much the Church needs them. Today is also a day of deep meaning because Jesus Christ - the Son of God, the Lord of history, the Saviour of the world - is present in our midst. Through his holy Gospel he speaks to us in the words that he once addressed to his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and so, I am with you always..." .

2. This command and this promise of Jesus were the inspiration for the evangelization of Ghana and all Africa, and they have shaped the lives of all who have collaborated in the cause of the Gospel. In a special way these words have been taken to heart by numerous catechists over the past century. And today I wish to manifest the Church's profound esteem for these devoted workers in the service of the Gospel. I express the gratitude of the whole Catholic Church to these catechists who are here today, to their predecessors in the faith and, to their fellow catechists throughout the continent of Africa - gratitude for helping to make disciples for Christ; for helping people to believe that Jesus is the Son of God; for helping to instruct their brothers and sisters in his life, and thus to build up his Body, the Church. This catechizing activity has been accomplished by word and example, and the dedication of countless catechists and their deep attachment to the person of Jesus Christ remain a chapter of glory in the history of this land and this continent.

3. The Church recognizes in these catechists people called to exercise a particular ecclesial role,

a special sharing in the responsibility for the advancement of the Gospel. She sees them as witness of faith, servants of Jesus Christ and his Church, effective collaborators in the mission of establishing, developing and fostering the life of the Christian community. In the history of evangelization many of these catechists have in fact been teachers of religion, leaders in their communities, zealous lay missionaries, and examples of faith. They have stood faithfully by the missionaries and the local clergy, supporting their ministry while fulfilling their own distinctive task. The catechists have rendered many services connected with communicating Christ, implanting the Church and bringing the transforming and regenerative power of the Gospel ever more into the lives of their brothers and sisters. They have assisted people in many human needs and contributed to development and progress.

4. In all of this they have explicitly made known the name and person of Jesus Christ, his teaching, his life, his promises and his Kingdom. The communities that they have helped to build up were based on the same elements as were found in the early Church: on the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, on the Eucharist and prayers . Thus the Lordship of Christ was fostered in one community after another, from one generation to the next. Through their generous work, Christ's command is continually fulfilled and his promise verified.

5. The Church is not only grateful for what has been accomplished by the catechists in the past, but she is confident for the future. Despite new conditions, new requirements and new obstacles, the relevance of this great apostolate will remain undiminished, because there will always be a need to develop an initial faith and to lead people to the fullness of Christian life. An increased realization of the dignity and importance of the role of the catechist is but one consequence of the Second Vatican Council's insistence on the fact that the whole Church shares responsibility for the Gospel. Only with the collaboration of her catechists will the Church be able to fulfil adequately the challenge that I described in my Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in our time: "As the twentieth century draws to a close, the Church is bidden by God and by events - each of them a call from him - to renew her trust in catechetical activity as a prime aspect of her mission. She is bidden to offer catechesis her best resources in people and energy, without sparing effort, toil or material means, in order to organize it better and to train qualified personnel. This is no mere human calculation; it is an attitude of faith" .

6. The Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, numerous Bishops and Episcopal Conferences have placed strong emphasis on the formation' of catechists, and in this they are worthy of the highest praise. The destiny of the Church in Africa is undoubtedly linked with the success of this initiative. I wish therefore to give full encouragement to this wonderful work. The future of catechetical activity will depend on sound programmes of preparation, where there is ever greater instruction for the catechists, where priority is given to the spiritual and; doctrinal formation of the catechists, and where catechists are able to experience in some measure the authentic sense of Christian community that they are called upon to build.

The instruments of catechesis must also be given due attention, including effective catechetical materials that take into account the need for the incarnation of the Gospel in determined local cultures. Moreover, the whole Church must feel committed to help face the difficulties and problems inherent in sustaining catechetical programmes. In a special way, the whole community of the Church must show its esteem for the important vocation of catechists, who must feel supported by their brothers and sisters.

7. Above all, to ensure the success of all catechetical activity, the aim of catechesis itself must remain crystal clear: catechesis is a work of faith that is far beyond any technique; it is a commitment of Christ's Church. Its primary and essential object is the mystery of Christ; its definitive aim is to put people in communion with Jesus Christ. Through catechesis the activity of Jesus the Teacher goes on; he elicits from his brethren and adherence to his person, and through his word and sacraments he leads them to his Father and to the fullness of life in the Most Holy Trinity.

8. Gathered here today to celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice, we express our trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to raise up and sustain, for the glory of God's Kingdom, new generations of catechists, who will faithfully transmit the Good News of salvation and bear witness to Christ and him crucified.

9. Today the Church offers to the catechists the sign of Christ's love, the great symbol of Redemption: the Cross of the Saviour. For catechists of every age the Cross is the credential of authenticity and the measure of success. The message of the Cross is truly "the power of God". Dear catechists, dear brothers and sisters: in fulfilling your role, in communicating Christ, remember the words of a pioneer catechist of the fourth century, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem: "The Catholic Church is proud of all Christ's actions, but her greatest boast is the Cross".

With this Cross, with the crucifix that you receive today as a sign of your mission in the Church, go forward confidently and joyfully. And remember too that Mary is always standing next to Jesus, close to you; she is always by the Cross. She will lead you safely to the victory of the Resurrection; and she will help you to communicate to others the Paschal Mystery of her Son.

Beloved catechists of Ghana and all Africa: Christ calls you to his service; the Church sends you forth. The Pope blesses you, and he commends you to the Queen of heaven. Amen.

