



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA
ON "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 26 September 1987

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. It is for me a special joy to meet with you, members of the Episcopal Conference of Nigeria, on this occasion of your *ad limina* visit. I warmly welcome you to this assembly by which we bear witness to our collegial unity. A few weeks ago I was pleased to address the first group of your brother Bishops from Nigeria. In particular, I reminded them that the College of Bishops is given to the Church by the Lord Jesus for safeguarding and deepening the unity of all her members.

It is in the exercise of your fraternity in Christ, with all its collegial manifestations, that you fulfil the offices of sanctifying, teaching and governing your people, mutually support one another as Bishops and keep faith with Christ through Peter. Our coming together today renews our fraternal communion with all the local Churches and their Bishops. Together we represent "the entire Church joined in the bond of peace, love and unity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 23).

2. I wish to express my gratitude to Archbishop Ezeanya for the devoted sentiments which he has conveyed to me on behalf of the clergy, religious and lay people of your respective Dioceses. And I wish to reciprocate by offering my cordial greetings of grace and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ to all those entrusted to your pastoral care. To each of them I repeat in the words of the Apostle Paul: "I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and knowledge – even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1Cor. 1, 4-7).

My beloved brothers, you are the pastors of sixteen local Churches in the different regions of

Nigeria. I am well aware that you bring with you today *the deep and lively faith of your people*. I fondly recall my pastoral visit among you when I was able to witness for myself the love of your people for Christ and his Church.

3. At this time I wish to express *my fraternal affection for all the priests who actively collaborate with you* in shepherding the flock of Christ entrusted to your care. As I have said on a previous occasion, “like yourselves, I learned as a Bishop to understand firsthand the ministry of priests, the problems affecting their lives, the splendid efforts they are making, the sacrifices that are an integral part of their service to God’s people. Like yourselves, I am fully aware of how much Christ depends on his priests in order to fulfil in time his mission of redemption” (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Ad Archiepiscopos et Episcopos V et VII Regionis Pastoralis Civitatum Foederatarum Americae Septemtrionalis, coram simul admissos occasione oblata eorum visitationis “ad limina”*, die 9 nov. 1978: Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, I (1978) 122).

An essential aspect of our apostolic charge is to *confirm our brother priests in their identity* as ordained ministers of the Church. The meaning and worth of the ministerial priesthood can only be adequately explained by the principles which justify the Church herself. The priest is a servant of Jesus Christ. The power and glory of God abide in him in a special manner. The ministerial priesthood is indispensable to the worship of God and to the Church’s mission of proclaiming the Gospel.

4. We must never tire of asserting *the essential priorities, of the priesthood*. Each brother priest is meant to be with us, in the words of Saint Paul, “a servant of Christ... set apart to proclaim the Gospel of God” (*Rom. 1, 1*). The apostolic priorities, as stated in the Acts of the Apostles, are “to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word” (*Act. 6, 4*).

Similarly, the Second Vatican Council did not fail to emphasize the ministry of both the word and the Eucharist. For example, the Council clearly states: “The ministry of priests takes its start from the Gospel message” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis, 2*). At the same time it points out that the word reaches its culmination in the Eucharist, which is itself “the source and summit of the whole work of evangelization” (*Ibid. 5*).

5. It is in the Eucharistic Sacrifice that the priest finds the source of all his pastoral charity (Cfr. *ibid. 14*), the basis for his own spirituality and the strength to make the daily offering of his life together with the sacrifice of Jesus. It is also through the Eucharist that his celibacy is confirmed as he enjoys sacramental communion with our merciful Redeemer and Lord.

The ministry to the People of God which we as Bishops share with our brother priests is greatly influenced by the quality of *our mutual fidelity*: our faithfulness to our priests, their loyalty to us. If we are true brothers to our priests, we know their burdens and their needs. At the same time they, as brothers to us, often know the special problems which trouble ourselves. At moments of

difficulty, together with the help of God's grace, it is the solidarity of priests, with their understanding and compassion, which helps us to perform, with generosity and perseverance, every priestly function that Christ has committed to the College of his Bishops in communion with Peter.

6. It is the Church, and more precisely the Bishop, who sends a priest to preach the Good News of salvation. That is why priestly obedience always remains an important virtue. It does much more than make the priest ready to serve; it helps ensure that his ministry is fruitful and always building up God's people in unity.

Referring to the importance of priestly obedience, the Second Vatican Council says: "Since the priestly ministry is the ministry of the Church herself, it can be discharged only by hierarchical communion with the whole body. Therefore pastoral love demands that acting in this communion, priests dedicate their own wills through obedience to the service of God and their brothers and sisters. This love requires that they accept and carry out in a spirit of faith whatever is commanded or recommended by the Sovereign Pontiff, their own Bishop, or other superiors" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 15).

7. In his Encyclical *On Priestly Celibacy*, Pope Paul VI reminded his brother Bishops that "it is your fraternal and kindly presence and deeds that must fill up in advance the human loneliness of the priest, which is so often the cause of his discouragement and temptations. Before being the superiors and judges of your priests, be their masters, fathers, friends, their good and kind brothers, always ready to understand, to sympathize and to help. In every possible way encourage your priests to be your personal friends and to be very open with you. This will not weaken the relationship of juridical obedience; rather it will transform it into pastoral love so that they will obey more willingly, sincerely and securely" (Pauli VI *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 92).

I am well aware of the great importance which you attribute to providing well prepared candidates for the ministerial priesthood. This is accomplished in large measure by the careful attention and support which you yourselves give to the programmes of priestly formation in your minor and major seminaries. I wish to assure you of my solicitude in this endeavour which is essential to the Church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel. May each of you with active and loving concern always be a true father in Christ to each of your seminarians (Cfr. *Optatam Totius*, 5).

8. Though I have spoken to you thus far about the ministerial priesthood, much of what I have said equally applies to Religious. The members of Institute of consecrated life constitute for the Church in Nigeria *an indispensable element in the great task of evangelization*. Their public witness to the counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience and their generous example of community life provide for the Church in Nigeria an authentic *evangelica testificatio*.

In your work with Religious I encourage you to renew your endeavours to manifest the great

esteem that the Church has for them in their vocations of consecrated love, urging them always to ever more generous collaboration in the corporate life of the ecclesial community. Religious offer inspiration to the rest of the faithful when they live their vocation in a spirit of joy and self-sacrifice. Likewise they give us a striking sign of the Church's eschatological dimension.

The very presence of Religious in the world is a great consolation for the Church, and an effective means of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. In Nigeria this proclamation has been accomplished in a special way by missionary priests, Sisters and Brothers who have manifested both heroism and holiness in planting the seeds of the Church. And I join you in giving thanks to God for the constantly growing number of native vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Continue to pray for more vocations and to invite young people to follow Christ in the Church's consecrated life.

9. The forthcoming Assembly of the Synod of Bishops causes me to turn my reflections to the important *role of the laity*. I am very pleased to acknowledge the growing influence of lay organizations in your country, such as the National Laity Council, the Catholic Women's Organization, the Legion of Mary, the Catholic Youth Organization and the Catholic Students Organization, each of which is making a significant contribution to evangelization in Nigeria. Moreover, it is with satisfaction that I have learned of the great interest of your lay people in the missionary activities of the Church. This is clearly seen in the strong support given by the Nigerian laity to the National Missionary Seminary of Saint Paul at Abuia, which is receiving a steadily increasing number of candidates to prepare for service as missionary priests.

Especially since the close of the Second Vatican Council the lay people of the Church in Nigeria have come more and more to see themselves as *active participants in the Church's life and mission*. This is evidenced in the concern of the laity for the growth and well-being of the Church in each of their own communities. It is also seen in the greater interest of the laity in their role as evangelizers and catechists.

In the teaching of the Council we find this description of the sacred calling of the laity; "The laity are gathered together in the People of God and make up the Body of Christ under one Head. Whoever they are, they are called upon, as living members, to expend all their energy for the growth of the Church and its continuous sanctification. For this very energy is a gift of the Creator and a blessing of the Redeemer" (*Lumen Gentium*, 33).

10. I cannot fail to mention that the Church in Nigeria has as a special object of its solicitude *the country's youth*. Pastoral outreach to young people should be one of your highest priorities today, for they form the largest particular group within the ecclesial community and many of them are sorely tempted to disregard the Church, especially if they are ignorant of her teaching. I am pleased that there are at present various initiatives directed towards the apostolate of youth, such as the Catholic Youth Organization. But I also realize there are some negative forces to contend

with. In the face of such difficulty the Church in Nigeria must seek above all *to deepen the young people's faith*. New forms of apostolate must be discovered, new initiatives must be tried. But the primary means at the disposal of the Church is the whole apostolate of Catholic education. In every age, this remains a fundamental task of the Christian community, the teaching of the truths of our faith.

Catholic education is vital for all members of the Church for its purpose is to help persons to arrive at the fullness of Christian life. But it is only right that major efforts in this regard be directed to the education of young people. In order to grow to maturity in Christ, our youth need a systematic presentation of the whole of Christian revelation. We must hand on to them all that Jesus commanded to be taught (Cfr. *Matth. 28, 20*), *the whole moral and doctrinal content of the sacred deposit of faith*.

I am aware that you face serious obstacles in your endeavours to maintain and administer the Catholic Schools. Yet you are seeking every possible means to carry out this crucial part of your responsibility as Bishops. I offer you my fraternal encouragement and prayerful support for all these deserving efforts, fully convinced that there is nothing more important for the educational task than the guidance and leadership of the Bishops.

11. I wish to assure you of my continued prayers for your Nation, that Almighty God will ever lead the Government and people along the paths of peace, justice, harmony and social progress.

In all your pastoral endeavours you can be sure that I am united with you and close to you in the love of Jesus Christ. Together we have a single purpose: to prove faithful to the pastoral trust committed to us by the Lord, to lead the People of God to the Kingdom of Heaven. May Mary, the Mother of the Church and Queen of the Apostles, who is "a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim people of God" (*Lumen Gentium*, 68), intercede for us. In the name of Jesus, peace to you and to all your people. With my Apostolic Blessing.

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