



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
OF THE GAMBIA, LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Thursday, 9 July 1992 Dear Brother Bishops, 1. This meeting on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul brings to my mind the rich diversity of your peoples and of the Church in the Archdiocese of Monrovia and the Dioceses of Cape Palmas and Gbarnga in *Liberia*; the Archdiocese of Freetown and Bo, and the Dioceses of Kenema and Makeni in *Sierra Leone*; and in the Diocese of Banjul in *The Gambia*. The *Interterritorial Catholic Bishops' Conference* (ITCABIC) which you form has proved to be an apt instrument of communion and mutual help in caring for the life of the Catholic communities of your three countries. I greet you all with affection in our Lord Jesus Christ, and I thank Bishop O'Riordan for his words of presentation on your behalf. I pray for the peace and growth of God's beloved people committed to your pastoral ministry. I would like to begin by recalling the visit which I made last February to *The Gambia*, where I was warmly welcomed not only by Bishop Cleary and the members of the Church but by the Government and the whole people. To all of them I am grateful. I was deeply impressed by their commitment to the progress of their country, and by their awareness that such progress depends on putting the human person at the centre of social, juridical and political endeavours. I had also wished to visit *Liberia*, but that was made impossible by the tragic war which has almost destroyed that nation and which has had grave effects for *Sierra Leone* as well. 2. Since your last *ad Limina* visit, new and heavy burdens have been added to your already difficult pastoral mission. The spectre of drought has appeared on the horizon, with dramatic consequences for the well-being and even survival of some of the peoples of West Africa. A *fratricidal* war has wrought havoc, causing many deaths and incalculable destruction, and leaving in its wake hundreds of thousands of refugees and homeless people, countless orphans and injured, divisions and hatreds that will take generations to overcome. I have followed these events with great sadness and I earnestly hope for a solution that will put an end to violence, foster reconciliation and permit your peoples to return to their homes and rebuild their lives. *The Catholic community has been deeply affected*. You are the sad witnesses of how an unspeakable wave of violence has destroyed churches and missions, schools and health-care centres, and made practically every other activity on behalf of the local populations impossible. For the Church, this terrible war has in many cases

brought to nothing years of effort and work. And yet, in the midst of all this suffering the light of faith and Christian love has not been extinguished. The *Church in Sierra Leone* especially deserves recognition for the assistance being given to Liberian refugees and to its own citizens, forced to leave their villages and abandon their already limited possessions in the face of attacks by the armed groups in conflict. With fraternal concern I prayed for you, the *Liberian Bishops*, asking God to give you strong faith and courage as you ministered to your people in distress and sought to keep alive in such very difficult circumstances the evangelical message of hope and trust in Divine Providence. As Pastors, with confidence in Christ's teaching about the sublime value of love, to the point of heroic love of one's enemies, you must continue to *call your people to reconciliation*, to the observance of legitimate law and order, to love of peace, and to respect for the human rights which have been so cruelly trampled upon in this tragic conflict. We must hope and pray that conditions will improve so that the normal life of the Church can be reactivated, and especially so that the *Missionary priests, brothers and sisters* can as soon as possible return to their apostolates. They are fully a part of your local Churches, for in Christ all are brothers and sisters, and in the love of God which has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Cf. Rom. 5:5) differences of race, culture and language are brought into a higher unity. I appeal to the Missionary Congregations involved to be as cooperative and generous as conditions allow. This is an instance which has called forth and continues to call forth that radical self-giving love characteristic of Missionary priests, Religious and lay volunteers.³ *The Church's role* in such situations is not to take sides but to *serve the spiritual needs of all, without discrimination*. A Bishop's task is to bear witness to the Gospel message of peace, and to invoke and communicate God's grace of healing. He must pay particular attention to the underlying moral crisis of society: the weakening of family ties and of the traditions which ensured solidarity between individuals and groups, the lack of social justice, the degradation of truth and honesty in human relations. He must speak out against the corruption which destroys the fabric of civic life, and he must endeavour to form the consciences of the faithful, especially of political and economic leaders, in the principles and values upon which a truly human and just society can be organized for the common good. I encourage you, in responding to questions of a political and social nature, to maintain great harmony among yourselves and always to speak with the clear voice of the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep (Cf. Jn. 10:27).⁴ In spite of difficulties of various kinds, the Church in your countries *has been and continues to be actively involved in education*. The positive results of this ecclesial commitment are easily seen. Education is an activity which the Church esteems highly, as her whole history indicates. But in the present circumstances of Africa it constitutes an indispensable condition for stability and progress. Since Africans themselves must be the principal agents of their own development, the role of education is paramount. As we know, for much of public opinion in your countries the Church is almost synonymous with education and health-care. Even in environments closed to the direct proclamation of the Gospel, such centres and institutions, serving the community at large, have always borne striking witness to the Christian spirit of love and service. Today they are even more essential, when the needs of the people have enormously increased. I therefore wish to encourage you, with the continuing help of the Religious and concerned laity of your Dioceses, to maintain and where possible increase your efforts in this

field.⁵ As Pastors who love your people and feel the urgency of the Lord's command to bring the word of God to all creatures, you are deeply concerned by the scarcity of labourers to work among those who are open to the Gospel message. Notwithstanding the limited possibilities of your local Churches I wish to exhort you – in the words of the Encyclical Letter "[Redemptoris Missio](#)" – not to forget that "there must be no lessening of the impetus to preach the Gospel and to establish new Churches among peoples or communities where they do not yet exist, for this is the first task of the Church" (John Paul II, [Redemptoris Missio](#), 34). Far from being dismayed at the many difficulties in the way of the mission *ad gentes*, I believe we are seeing the dawn of a new missionary age, fostered by the increasing presence of personnel from the younger Churches (Cf. John Paul II, [Message for the World Mission Day 1992](#), 7 Jun. 1992). A wise programme of mission development must be an essential aspect of your care of the Churches entrusted to you. For this task, I pray that the Lord of the harvest will strengthen and sustain you and your clergy, Religious and catechists! Given *the minority situation of the Church* in your respective countries, where Catholics constitute only about two per cent of the population, the witness and leadership of priests and Religious, mutual harmony and concerted action among the various Church groups and organizations are more than ever necessary. The Liturgy, which is the heart of all the Church's life and dynamism, is also the strongest bonding factor between the members of Christ's Body. You have already done much to ensure the celebration of the Mass and the Sacraments in the principal local languages. I hope that you will be able to continue that work, which is essential for a wise and theologically sound *inculturation of the Christian message*. Your aim in this sphere must be to "evangelize" in depth the culture and traditions of the faithful. The end result of a proper inculturation of the faith is to preserve all that is good and noble in a people's way of life by imbuing and "informing" all significant events and relations with the grace of Christ. Thus, important moments such as birth, the approach of adulthood, courtship and marriage, work, sickness and death, the joys and sorrows of family life, and events which affect the whole community, will be marked by the Christian spirit and by the rituals of the Church. The outlook and attitudes of individuals, families and communities will thus become more and more identified with the truth revealed in Jesus Christ and made known, through the Holy Spirit, in every age and to every people (Cf. Jn. 14:26). Thus too the law of Christ, especially the supreme commandment of love, will clarify moral choices and make possible the freedom which leads to everlasting life (Cf. *ibid.* 8:32 and 51). A deep inculturation of the faith is also the basis of a *fruitful interreligious dialogue with the Muslim majorities* in your countries, for it enables Christians and Muslims to understand better one another's point of view, to identify issues of common interest and areas of possible cooperation in the solution of local or national problems, and in the construction of a more just and tolerant society. During my visit to West Africa in February last, I was deeply struck by the level of reciprocal respect between Christians and Muslims. This mutual openness gives rise to that "dialogue of everyday life" which makes it possible for citizens of the same country truly to support each other in serving the common good (Cf. John Paul II, [General Audience](#), 3, 4 Mar. 1992).⁶ The *increase of vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life which you have experienced is a sure sign of God's love* for his people and of the vitality of your communities. The priesthood, as the sacramental configuration with Christ the High Priest, is a ministry of service

and a mission, a sending out to exemplify and perpetuate "the charity of Christ the Good Shepherd" (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 57). For this reason the seminary "must seek really and truly to initiate the candidate into the sensitivity of being a shepherd, in the conscious and mature assumption of his responsibilities, in the interior habit of evaluating problems and establishing priorities and looking for solutions on the basis of honest motivations of faith and according to the theological demands inherent in pastoral work" (*Ibid.* 58). I am confident that you will continue to ensure that your seminarians acquire the deep sense of unselfish love which their vocation demands, so that they will be moved by sincere love for Christ and for his Body, the Church. Your young priests too need your close friendship and guidance in order to overcome the special difficulties of the first years of their ministry. I ask you to convey to all your priests and to the men and women Religious of your Dioceses the assurance of my daily prayers for their fidelity and perseverance. In Christ's name I thank them for their witness and for their generous service of God's people. In a special way I encourage the *Religious Sisters*, knowing how essential their presence is in ensuring that the truth and love of Christ prevail in difficult situations and circumstances. With a wise selection of candidates and appropriate spiritual guidance from experienced Religious, the newly established Diocesan Congregations too will play an increasingly fruitful part in incarnating the values of Christ's Kingdom in the lives of the faithful. I particularly commend to your care the growth and formation of these Institutes.⁷ A *committed and well-instructed Laity* is likewise the great hope of your ecclesial communities for a brighter future. Not only their full and active participation in the Liturgy but also the clear witness to Christian values which they give in the family and in society are the building-blocks of a vibrant and penetrating Christian presence. In your reports about conditions in your Dioceses you have rightfully been generous in praise for the priceless collaboration of your *catechists and lay leaders*. They are often the very life-line of their communities, and the future of the Church depends greatly on their fidelity. May God reward them with strength and joy! I thank you for the special attention which you give to youth. The lives of so many young people have been shattered and transformed by the violence which they have seen around them. As far as possible efforts must be made to help them find new hope and serenity. Much can be done by encouraging youth groups and associations, and through the Catholic schools and programmes of religious education. I also share your deep concern at the particular difficulties affecting *Christian marriage* in all your regions. Prevailing moral attitudes and the legalized and widespread practice of divorce and polygamy challenge Christian couples to a high degree of holiness and fidelity. Married people need the close support of the Church, and families should be encouraged to help one another through associations and activities aimed at fostering spirituality, formation and the apostolate, and at favouring a manner of living inspired by the Gospel and by the faith of the Church (Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 72). In this way, husbands and wives will display the depth of their love for each other and – in the words of the Letter to the Ephesians – their love will shine forth as "a great foreshadowing", that is, as a sign of the bond which unites Christ to his Church (Cf. Eph. 5:32).⁸ Dear Brothers, I wish you to take away from our meeting a renewed sense of the communion which as Successors of the Apostles we share in the service of Christ and his Kingdom. You are never far from my thoughts and prayers. I hope that other local Churches

around the world will take heed of your spiritual and material needs and be generous in love for you. May Mary Queen of Peace intercede for an end to hostilities and a return to the rule of law in Liberia; may her maternal love guide and protect the Church in Sierra Leone; and may her example of joyful obedience to God's will inspire and comfort the generous Catholic community of The Gambia. Upon you and the Churches you serve I invoke an abundance of divine gifts. God bless you and your peoples.

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