



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS
OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 18 December 1993

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome you, *the members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria*, here in Rome for your visit "*ad Limina Apostolorum*". I have been looking forward to our meeting as an occasion to celebrate and strengthen the bonds of our fraternal and ecclesial communion. I offer a particular word of welcome to those of you who are making your first quinquennial visit, with special congratulations to Bishop Obinna and Bishop O'Donnell, who were only recently ordained. The establishment of five new Dioceses and two Missions *sui iuris* since your last "*ad Limina*" visit are sure signs that Christ is building up his Church in your nation. For this we praise and bless his holy name.

A significant event in the life of the Church in Nigeria was last year's *National Eucharistic Congress*. This important gathering, with its theme of "The Eucharist and Evangelization", was an opportunity to confirm and increase that love and devotion for the Blessed Sacrament which is such an outstanding characteristic of Nigerian Catholics. The divine life which Christ pours out into his Church in the Eucharist is too great to be contained. It must be offered with loving urgency to all the world.

2. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said with eloquent simplicity, the Church is "missionary by her very nature" (*Ad Gentes*, 2). This essential ecclesial quality must shine forth with unobscured brilliance in each of the particular Churches, because, by a special relationship of mutual interiority, the Universal Church is present in each of them with all her essential elements (Cf. Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Communio Notio*, 7-9). In the particular

Churches of Nigeria the memory of the first evangelization is still fresh, stimulating you to continue that work unabated. In some regions only a small number of the people have come to know and accept the merciful love of the Saviour, while in other places the Church has taken firm root within a remarkably short time, and has already brought forth a marvelous abundance of fruit-not least the many vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Such striking proof of God's power at work in your midst should encourage you and the faithful to spare no effort in spreading the Gospel's light, so that what Christ once accomplished for the salvation of all may in the course of time come to achieve its effect among all peoples (Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 3). How can we not be deeply grateful at the fact that the Church in Nigeria is already engaged in missionary activity through the work of many Diocesan and Religious priests, as well as the many Sisters and Brothers, in all parts of your own country and in other countries of Africa and beyond? In particular, let us thank God for the positive contribution of the Missionary Society of Saint Paul, sponsored by your Conference.

To show ardent zeal for spreading the word of God is to stand steadfast in the heritage established by those courageous *missionaries* who first brought the Good News to Nigeria. Even today there are many generous men and women from abroad who have left home and family in order to serve the Gospel in your country. In view of the incomparable service they give to the Nigerian people, we must hope that your efforts to remove the legal obstacles to their residence will soon succeed.

3. The first proclamation of the Gospel, which through the Holy Spirit's gentle action in the hearts of those who hear it leads to conversion and Baptism, finds its complement and perfection in *catechesis*. Faith grows more mature, as Christ's disciples are educated and formed in a thorough and systematic knowledge of his person and message (Cf. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 19). The popularity of Bible-study in so many of your parishes and communities testifies to the great thirst of the faithful for the word of God. This direct contact with the sacred text itself, accompanied by devout prayer (Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 25) and supported by a clear exposition of doctrine as found in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, will ensure that the members of the Church will be secure in their faith and prepared to implement its demands in all the circumstances of their life and activity.

Furthermore, as they are confirmed in the revealed truth, the faithful will be able to *respond to the objections raised with increasing frequency by the followers of sects and new religious movements*. Catechesis is especially important for young people, for whom an enlightened faith is a lamp to guide their path into the future. It will be their source of strength as they face the uncertainties of the political and economic situation now evolving in Africa. Firm and humble submission to the word of Christ, as authentically proclaimed in the Church, also forms the basis for your relationship with other Churches and ecclesial communities, and for the dialogue which you seek with the followers of Islam and African traditional religion. By your continued study of all that is good, true and noble in your peoples' cultures, it will become clearer how evangelization can spread deeper roots among them.

4. At this crucial moment in the history of Nigeria, it is vital that Catholics should continue to work wisely and courageously for the common good. In a special way they should show, by mutual love and respect, that ethnic antagonism and clannishness have no place in the Christian community. Sustained by you, their Pastors, the faithful will be able to bear witness to the transcendent dignity and worth of every human person, and to the right of everyone to participate in all aspects of national life. These fundamental values, and the universal and unchanging moral norms which serve to guard and protect them, "represent", as I pointed out in the Encyclical Letter "Veritatis Splendor", "the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of genuine democracy" (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 96).

It is this moral law which you have proclaimed in your recent appeals for *respect for the religious liberty of all Nigerians*, for an end to corruption in the conduct of civil affairs, and for the observance of sound ethical norms in the transmission of human life. Your Episcopal Conference has earned the respect of many of your fellow-citizens by forthrightly applying the Church's moral and social teaching to the present situation. In response to events earlier in the year, you have reaffirmed that respect for the will of the people and love for the nation, together with honesty and justice, must be the basis for decisions about the country's future. The more you give evidence of unity within the realm of your Conference, the more you will build up unity in the Church and win greater credibility as witnesses of Christ and teachers of Catholic doctrine in your vast country. Likewise, the building of unity goes beyond your national frontiers. *The Catholic Institute of West Africa*, for example, by offering a solid formation and fostering theological reflection, should be a catalyst of ever deeper ecclesial communion and increasing pastoral cooperation throughout English-speaking West Africa.

5. Turning now to your helpers in the pastoral ministry, I wish to encourage you, in the words of the Council, *always to welcome priests with a special love and to regard them as sons and friends* (Cf. *Christus Dominus*, 16). At ordination, priests receive a share in the consecration and mission of Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd (Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 16). The Holy Spirit reshapes their hearts according to the pattern of the heart of Christ the Priest, so that with his own compassion they will be ready to put aside all earthly ambition in order to bring to the poor, the weak and the defenceless the protection and support of the truth of the Gospel (Cf. Mt. 9, 35-36). Filled with the very love which Christ himself has for his flock, they will gladly go in search of one lost sheep, one stray sinner in need of the light of life (Cf. *ibid.* 18: 12-14; cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 22-23).

The priest is not the mere caretaker of an institution; he is an evangelist and doctor of the human soul. All of his talents and education and accomplishments are rightly directed only to this end. In order to carry out faithfully their sublime mission, your priests – especially the newly ordained – must have your fatherly and fraternal support. They rely on your friendship, as well as on that of their brother priests (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 28).

As they grow in appreciation of the incomparable privilege of acting in the person of Christ, it will become easier for them to devote themselves completely, in chastity and simplicity, to their ministry, and they will find immeasurable joy and peace in their work.

The dispositions of a true shepherd must be nurtured in the heart of a priest long before the day of his ordination. This is the purpose of *the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation provided in the seminary*. In your quinquennial reports you have expressed a great solicitude for your seminaries. It is my hope that the Post-Synodal Exhortation "Pastores Dabo Vobis", together with the "Guidelines" from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, will direct you in evaluating and improving these institutions. I would like to take this occasion to urge you once more to give your best priests to the work of priestly formation, even if it means sacrifice in other areas; and it goes without saying that it is especially important that every candidate should be in contact with an exemplary spiritual director.

6. In the life of the People of God, *Religious and Missionary Institutes* have historically offered outstanding service in the spread of the faith and the formation of new local Churches (Cf. John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, 69-70). This is certainly the case in Nigeria, today as yesterday. While respecting the legitimate autonomy established for religious communities, it is a Bishop's duty to help them fulfil their obligation to bear witness to Christ's Kingdom and to proclaim the Good News. This includes encouraging superiors to discern carefully the suitability of those who seek admission, and helping them to provide a solid spiritual and intellectual formation both before and after profession. The more faithfully and devotedly the Religious in your midst live out their consecration to Christ in chastity, poverty and obedience, the more clearly will the men and women of your country see that "the Kingdom of God has come near" (Lk. 10: 9).

7. From the earliest days of the planting of the Church in Nigeria, the lay faithful, especially in the respected figure of the catechist, have played a significant role; and justly so, for as full members of the Church they "have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel" (John Paul II, Christifideles Laici, 33). Your local Churches are blessed with gifted cooperators in the evangelization of society and culture. Receiving from their Pastors the formation and encouragement they need, they are truly a leaven for renewal. Of particular importance is the task of *transforming marriage and family life according to the Creator's original design*, for part of the new covenant in Christ is the recovery for mankind of this fundamental good (Cf. Mk. 10: 6-12).

8. Dear Brothers, on the occasion of the Eucharistic Congress in Owerri, your people used a special prayer, entrusting to our Eucharistic Lord all their hopes and expectations, their cares and anxieties. Their concerns are not unlike those which Christians throughout Africa daily pour out in supplication to our Heavenly Father: the safety of their children and the protection of their homes, a longing for peace and reconciliation, the spread of the Gospel, a hunger for holiness and for the presence of God. In the months to come, you and I, together with our Brother Bishops of Africa, will be ever more mindful of the prayerful support of the whole Church as we prepare for the

Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to continue to bless and make fruitful our preparations for this important ecclesial event. Commending you and your priests, Religious and lay faithful to the loving protection of Mary Queen of Africa, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and communion in her Divine Son.

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