



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Mr. ISAAC AGBOOLA ALUKO-OLOKUN,
NEW AMBASSADOR OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA
ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE***

Thursday, 17 December 1998

Mr Ambassador,

I extend a warm welcome to you as I accept the Letters of Credence appointing you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the Holy See. I take this opportunity to reaffirm my sentiments of affection and esteem for the Nigerian people, whose hospitality, enthusiasm and earnest hopes for the future I was blessed to experience at first hand earlier this year during my second Pastoral Visit to your country. I arrived “as a friend, as one who is deeply concerned for the destiny of Nigeria” (cf. [*Arrival Address at Abuja*](#), 21 March 1998, No. 2); and I receive Your Excellency today with that same friendship and concern for your people and nation. In this regard, I am very pleased to hear you refer to your Government’s firm commitment to pursue the programme for transition to civilian rule, and your mention of the efforts being made to put into place the structures and institutions necessary to ensure enduring democratic rule in the new millennium. Indeed, I cannot fail to be encouraged by the prospects for political stability and social progress which these steps represent, not for Nigeria alone but for other African countries as well. At this moment in history, your nation can become a beacon for the rest of the continent, by showing that the cooperation of Government, private interest groups and all sectors of the population — when they are genuinely committed to work together for harmony and national unity — can truly build a society that respects all its members in their dignity, rights and freedoms. Such a society is of course possible only if it is founded upon the ideals of truth and justice, which are also the prerequisites for another allimportant quest in our modern world: the quest for reconciliation and peace. In fact, no lasting peace can ever come about merely as the result of structures and mechanisms; rather it depends on a style of human coexistence marked by mutual respect and by an ability both to seek and to grant forgiveness. Such forgiveness does not preclude the search for truth but actually requires it; any evil which has been done must be acknowledged and, as far as possible, corrected. There is no contradiction between forgiveness and justice, for “forgiveness neither eliminates nor lessens the need for reparation which justice requires, but seeks to reintegrate individuals and groups into society, and

States into the community of Nations. No punishment can suppress the inalienable dignity of those who have committed evil. The door to repentance and rehabilitation must always remain open” (*Message for the 1997 World Day of Peace*, 5). It is in this context that I wish to say a word of appreciation for the readiness with which General Abubakar and the Nigerian Government have listened to the appeals made by the Holy See and others on behalf of political prisoners held in your country. The action taken by your Leaders in response to these appeals is an indication of their sincerity and their commitment to serving the common good of all Nigerians and to overcoming the tensions and divisions of the past. As Your Excellency has commented, the Catholic Church in Nigeria has for many years worked zealously for human development, especially in the fields of education and health care, bringing great benefit to society. Being profoundly convinced of the universal brotherhood of all men and women as God’s beloved children, created in his image and likeness, Catholics seek to foster the common good and encourage people to take a healthy and legitimate pride in their country. In this context, and looking to the new political era which is about to dawn in Nigeria, I express the hope that the individual Nigerian States, with the encouragement and support of the Federal Government, will take the steps necessary to start the process of returning to the Church the schools which were taken over more than two decades ago. In this way an extensive network of Catholic schools will begin to flourish once more and will be able to make a valuable contribution to the nation’s future. Another important factor for the development and progress of any country is solidarity with the poorest and neediest members of the population, both individuals and groups. This should also include those hard hit by natural or man-made disasters. My thoughts go in a particular way to the hundreds of victims of the recent oil pipeline explosion and fire in Southern Nigeria. Immediate assistance and long-range plans to alleviate so much suffering are urgently necessary. The aim must be to preserve the human dignity of those facing hardship and difficulty; society has to show its commitment to safeguarding the rights of all its members without distinction. Mr Ambassador, I am grateful for the warm greetings which you bring from General Abubakar, and I ask you kindly to convey to him and the Government my personal best wishes. As you take up your high responsibilities, I assure you of the full cooperation of the offices of the Roman Curia for the success of your mission. Upon yourself and the beloved people of Nigeria I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty

God.

**Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XXI, 2 p. 1291-1293. *L'Osservatore Romano* 18.12. 1998 p.5. *L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly edition in English* n. 51/52 p.5. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana