



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE GHANA BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 20 February 1999

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways" (2 Thes 3:16). It is a great joy for me to greet you, *the members of the Ghana Bishops' Conference*, and to welcome you to the Vatican on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. This is for all of us a moment of grace in which we celebrate and seek to strengthen the bonds of fraternal communion which unite us in the task of bearing witness to the Lord and spreading the Good News of salvation. I offer a special word of greeting to those among you who are making your first quinquennial visit. Indeed, since your Conference's last visit to Rome, six new Dioceses have been established in Ghana, a positive sign of the work being done for Christ and of the building up of his Church in your country. This is yet another cause for praising the holy name of Jesus, at the mention of which "every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

Last year, your local Church celebrated two very significant events: the Second National Eucharistic Congress and the National Pastoral Congress. These important gatherings served to confirm and increase that love and devotion for the Blessed Sacrament which is central to Catholic worship and prayer. From the Eucharist the Church receives the strength for that service and outreach which characterize her concern for the spiritual well-being of her children and of all people. *The divine life which Christ pours out upon his Church in the Eucharist is too great to be contained and must be offered with loving urgency to the whole world.*

2. This is the truth which in no small part inspires and sustains the Church's missionary activity; indeed, as the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council noted with eloquent simplicity, the Church is "missionary by her very nature" (*Ad gentes*, n. 2). This is one of her essential qualities and it must shine brightly in each particular Church: for the universal Church is present in each local Church

with her complete array of fundamental elements (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion *Communio innotio*, nn. 7-9). *The energy and zeal of the first evangelization of Ghana must continue to be a source of strength and enthusiasm* as you proclaim Christ and his saving Gospel, helping others to know and accept his merciful love.

Not least in this regard is your duty to address those issues of particular importance for the social, economic, political and cultural life of your country. In the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, the Synod Fathers acknowledged that the proper administration of public affairs in the interrelated areas of politics and the economy is essential if justice and peace are to flourish on your continent (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 110). I am pleased to note that in your pastoral letter of Advent 1997 you discussed these very issues. As you know so well, it belongs in a particular way to the Church to *speak out on behalf of those who have no voice*, thus being a leaven of peace and solidarity, particularly where they are most fragile and threatened. Especially important in this regard are your continuing efforts to *resolve ethnic tensions*; for rivalries based on race or ethnic origin have no place in the Church of Christ and are particularly scandalous when they interfere with parish life or disrupt the spirit of fraternity and solidarity among priests.

3. In all of this, yours must be an invitation, gentle yet insistent, to conversion. Conversion is the result of the effective proclamation of the Gospel which, through the Holy Spirit's action in the hearts of those who hear it, leads to the acceptance of God's saving word. The first preaching of the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ finds its necessary complement in *catechesis*. Faith grows to maturity as Christ's disciples are educated and formed in a thorough and systematic knowledge of his person and message (cf. *Catechesi tradendae*, n. 19). For this reason, *the continuing formation of the laity* must continue to be a priority in your mission as preachers and teachers. This spiritual and doctrinal formation should aim at helping the laity to carry out their prophetic role in a society which does not always recognize or accept the truth and values of the Gospel. In order that they may do their part in bringing about the new evangelization, they must be able to *see and judge all things in the light of Christ* (cf. *Christifideles laici*, n. 34).

Moreover, as they are confirmed in the revealed truth, the faithful will be able to respond to the objections raised by the followers of sects and new religious movements. *Catechesis is especially important for young people*. An enlightened faith is a lamp to guide their path into the future and a source of strength as they face the challenges and uncertainties of life. Firm and humble submission to the word of Christ, as authentically proclaimed by 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 people's cultures, it will become clearer how evangelization can develop ever deeper roots in their midst.

4. Here, we touch upon the important issue of *inculturation*. Practical attempts to promote

inculturation of the faith require a theology indissolubly linked to the mystery of the Incarnation and to an authentic Christian anthropology (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 55). A truly critical and genuinely evangelical discernment of cultural realities can only be undertaken in the light of the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A sound inculturation cannot overlook the Church's unequivocal conviction that culture, as a human creation, is inevitably marked by sin and needs to be healed, ennobled and perfected by the Gospel (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 17). As people find inspiration and direction through *contact with God's saving word* they will naturally be led to work for a *profound transformation of the society in which they live*. The Gospel message penetrates the very life of cultures, and becomes incarnate in them, precisely by "overcoming those cultural elements that are incompatible with the faith and Christian living and by raising their values to the mystery of salvation which comes from Christ" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 55). The challenges presented by inculturation are especially evident in the areas of *marriage and family life*: I commend and encourage your efforts to lead Christian couples to *live the truth and beauty of their married union in accordance with the demands of their new life in Christ*.

5. The growth of the Church in Ghana and the many vocations to the priesthood and religious life are striking proof of God's power at work in your midst, a power which issues forth in a marvellous abundance of fruits. Yours, my dear Brothers, is the task of seeing that these many fruits continue to ripen and multiply, effectively touching the lives of all those entrusted to your care. Turning to those who assist you most closely in your pastoral ministry, I urge you always *to cherish your priests with a special love and to regard them as precious co-workers and friends* (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 16). At ordination they were given a share in the consecration and mission of Jesus Christ (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 16). The Holy Spirit shapes their hearts according to the pattern of the heart of Christ, the Good Shepherd, and their formation must be such that with the compassion of Christ himself they are ready to *put aside all earthly ambition* in order to bring to the poor, the weak and the defenceless the truth, comfort and support of the Gospel. The priest is not a mere caretaker of an institution; he is not a business manager or entrepreneur. Rather he is an evangelist and doctor of souls; his talents, education and accomplishments are rightly directed to this end alone: his is *the incomparable privilege of acting in the person of Christ*. With your friendship and fraternal support, as well as that of their brother priests, it will be easier for your priests to devote themselves completely, in chastity and simplicity, to their ministry of service, in which they will find immeasurable joy and peace.

Of course, the attitudes and dispositions of a true shepherd must be nurtured in the heart of candidates for the priesthood long before ordination. This is the purpose of the *human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation provided in the seminary*. The solicitude which you show for your seminaries can only redound to the good of your local communities and contribute to the spread of God's kingdom. The guidelines contained in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, together with the suggestions included in the recent document of the

Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples following the Apostolic Visitation of the major seminaries in Ghana, will prove invaluable for assessing the suitability of candidates and improving their training. I also urge you to staff your seminaries with exemplary priests, even if this means sacrifices in other areas: for in the task of forming candidates to the priesthood *nothing speaks more eloquently than the example of a holy and committed priestly life*. At the same time, steps should be taken to ensure that proper priestly formation continues after ordination, especially during the early years of priestly ministry.

6. In the life of the Church in Ghana, as elsewhere in the world, religious and missionary institutes have played a decisive role in the spread of the faith and the formation of new local Churches (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, nn. 69-70). While respecting the legitimate internal autonomy established for religious communities, the Bishop is to help them fulfil - within the local Church - their obligation to bear witness to the reality of God's love for his people. As Pastors of Christ's flock, you should urge superiors to discern carefully the suitability of candidates to religious life and help them to provide a solid spiritual and intellectual formation, both before and after profession. *The more faithfully and devotedly the religious in your Dioceses live out their commitment to Christ in chastity, poverty and obedience, the more clearly will the men and women of Ghana see that "the kingdom of God is at hand"* (Mk 1:15).

7. In the fulfilment of your many duties, both you and your priests must always be attentive to the human and spiritual needs of your people. Time and resources should never be spent on diocesan or parochial structures or development projects at the expense of people; nor should such structures or projects impede *personal contact* with those whom God has called us to serve. Similarly, meetings between Bishops and priests should not be limited to discussions of administrative details, but should also provide an occasion to talk about the *personal, spiritual and pastoral joys and difficulties of priestly ministry*. In financial matters great equity and solidarity are required, and efforts must be made to share contributions received. At the same time steps should be taken to help local communities achieve greater economic self-sufficiency, so that the Church in Ghana will be less dependent on external aid. The Church's pastoral mission and the duty of her ministers "not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28) must be seen as the principal concern in all matters.

Dear Brother Bishops, my words to you today are meant to offer you encouragement in the Lord. I am fully aware of the daily toils of your ministry and of the generous dedication with which you carry out your service. I commend you and your Dioceses to the loving care of Mary Queen of Apostles. I pray that your efforts to lead the Church in Ghana to a joyous and fruitful celebration of the coming Jubilee, "a year of the Lord's favour" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 11), will be crowned with much success. Through that important event, may you and your people experience the boundless graces of the "new Advent" which the Spirit is preparing for the whole Church of God (cf. *ibid.*, n. 23). In this hope, I gladly impart to you and the priests, religious and laity of your local communities my Apostolic Blessing.

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