



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF CAMEROON  
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

*Tuesday, 1 June 1999*

*Your Eminence,*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. I am particularly pleased to welcome you, Bishops of the Catholic Church in Cameroon, on your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles, which always reinforces the ties that unite you with the universal Church. Thus you receive the joy and courage to carry out your episcopal ministry in a renewed way. The *ad limina* visit is also a time when you come to meet the Successor of Peter and his co-workers, to find in them the necessary support for your pastoral mission.

I cordially thank the President of your Episcopal Conference, Bishop André Wouking of Bafoussam, for his kind words on your behalf. They give a general outline of the concerns and hopes of the Church in Cameroon today.

Through you, I turn to the priests, religious, catechists and all the faithful of your Dioceses. Bring them the Pope's affectionate remembrance and the assurance of his prayers that their faith in Christ and their love of neighbour will increase. Please also convey my warm greetings to all the people of Cameroon, whose spirit of welcome and generosity I appreciated during my two visits to their country.

2. In recent years the Catholic Church in your country has shown great apostolic vitality, which has found particular expression in the creation of several Dioceses and a new Ecclesiastical Province. I would especially like to greet the Bishops who have come for their first *ad limina* visit. May you all be authentic servants of Christ and his Church among the people entrusted to you! Remembering my visit to Yaoundé for the closing of the African Synod, I fervently hope that the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* will be for each of you the charter of your pastoral and missionary commitment.

Today, Christian communities need Pastors who are humble and courageous men of faith, capable of discerning, in an attitude of acceptance and dialogue with you, the signs of the commanding of God's kingdom and of working to extend it. In human situations that are often difficult, marked particularly by the economic crisis and the poverty of many groups of people, they must be sowers of hope. Through their clear, true words, without hesitation of any kind, they will know how to be reliable guides in the search for truth not only for Catholics but also for people of good will.

As the Second Vatican Council states, the task of teaching is essential to the episcopal mission. The Bishops, in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are "authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people assigned to them, the faith which is destined to inform their thinking and direct their conduct, and under the light of the Holy Spirit they make that faith shine forth, drawing from the storehouse of Revelation new things and old; they make it bear fruit and with watchfulness they ward off whatever errors threaten their flock" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 25). As true teachers of Christ's faithful, you enable them to deepen their faith, especially by helping them not to separate it from their life and by inculcating in them a deep sense of Christian prayer. Teach them to listen faithfully to the Gospel in order to give it pride of place in their lives! Then they will learn to perceive better and to reject practices which are still in contradiction with the Christian faith and which prevent them from fully living the grace of their Baptism.

3. Your priests have a special place in the mission of bringing God's People to birth and forming them. I warmly greet them and encourage them to be always and everywhere credible and generous ministers of Christ and his Church, concerned to grow in continual communion with you. In contemporary society there are many obstacles to fidelity to the commitments made on their day of ordination; numerous obstacles also prevent them from considering the priesthood as a service to God, the Church and the world. May your priests not be disheartened! May they find in you brothers attentive to their problems, ready to accept them, to trust them, to help them in Gospel discernment and to support them vigorously in their efforts for a greater holiness of life, which is the most eminent form of witness among the faithful!

I firmly remind each of your priests that they urgently need to progress in a solid spiritual life, deeply marked by missionary dynamism, which will enable them to grow in their configuration to Christ and to share in his pastoral charity. May they remember that "the essential content of pastoral charity is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church, following the example of Christ" (Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 23).

Priests must express this total gift of self most especially in celibacy, a grace of the Lord which they should all strive to live. In fact, the practice of perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom "is at once a sign of pastoral charity and an incentive to it, as well as being in a special way a source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world" (Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 16). In

the sight of others, celibacy is also a witness of the priest's undivided consecration to the mission entrusted to him and a living sign of the world to come, already present through faith and charity (ibid.).

I invite each of your priests to give due priority to continuing formation in his priestly life. This is a basic requirement at any age and in any condition of life, if he is to continue living and acting in the spirit of Christ the Good Shepherd. By encompassing the human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral dimensions of life, it is a precious help for acquiring and sustaining the interior unity of priests. I also encourage them to cooperate with one another and, when the need arises, to find forms of common life and sharing by which they can deepen their priestly brotherhood, which is an expression of the unity of the presbyterate around the Bishop.

I know of the care you give to priestly vocations and the initial formation of the future pastors of your Dioceses. In seminaries, the human, intellectual and pastoral formation of candidates for the priesthood is an important and necessary foundation of their preparation for ministry. However it is essential to foster a spiritual formation which brings them into deep communion with Christ; it is through an attitude of filial trust in the Father and submission to the Spirit that they will remain firmly attached to the Church and faithful to their ministry. May those responsible for their formation, whom I thank for their generous service, always be concerned to train pastors who are humanly and spiritually sound!

4. In your country, the participation of men and women religious is considerable. With you, I thank the Lord for these generations of men and women from other continents who have brought Christ's Gospel to your land and have worked for over a century to establish a native Church with selfless courage and at the price of great sacrifices. Today, their presence is a visible sign of the Church's universality and a call to the mutual sharing of human and spiritual resources between local Churches. I encourage them in their pastoral service to your communities and in their concern for all the people, particularly by providing health care and social assistance, as well as through education and human advancement, which are signs of God's love for the most destitute. I also hope that the institutes of consecrated life founded in your regions can fully develop and in turn engage in missionary work beyond their countries' borders.

Moreover, to show that the Gospel has taken root, we hope that contemplative life, already present in some of your Dioceses, can spread even further, offering a unique witness of the Church's love for the Lord and contributing with mysterious apostolic fruitfulness to the growth of God's People (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 8).

5. So that the Church may be implanted and grow, catechists have a crucial role in the Christian community. I am deeply grateful to them for their missionary commitment, often made in difficult conditions. A thorough doctrinal and pedagogical formation, constant spiritual and apostolic renewal, and the need to provide decent living conditions for them are requirements that must be

one of the priority concerns of the Bishops and priests who guide them (cf. Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, n. 73). In their communities they have the responsibility of being authentic Gospel witnesses by leading an exemplary personal and family life, which will give greater force to their teaching. I hope that each of them will acquire an ever greater awareness of the demands of their vocation and of the Church's confidence in them, for the good of the Christian community.

6. The laity's involvement in the life of the Church and of society is an essential dimension of their baptismal calling. The mystery of communion that unites Christians with one another and with their Lord commits them to building united communities where everyone has a place, without distinction of background or social status, open and generous communities which willingly share with everyone the graces they have received. In fact, "the dignity as a Christian, the source of equality for all members of the Church, guarantees and fosters the spirit of communion and fellowship, and, at the same time, becomes the hidden dynamic force in the lay faithful's apostolate and mission" (Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 17). Thus the Church will grow as *God's Family*.

Furthermore, the vocation of the laity is to express their Christian life in society and community service. By their influence and commitments they help transform mentalities and structures to be more faithful to God's plan for the human family. To do this, they must receive a formation that will help them lead a harmonious Christian life and live the social implications of the Gospel. A serious initiation into the Church's social teaching will enable them to make an effective contribution to the joint development of the nation, in which everyone can participate and be actively involved. The pursuit of the common good also entails the duty to fight courageously all forms of corruption, waste or misappropriation of what belongs to the community to the advantage of a few.

7. The education of young people should be a primary concern of everyone. In fact, as the Second Vatican Council noted, "a true education aims at the formation of human persons with respect both to their final end and to the good of the society of which they are members and for which they will share responsibility as adults" (*Gravissimum educationis*, n. 1). As part of her mission, the Church must make moral and religious education available to all who desire it. Catholic schools, therefore, have a special role to play. Despite the difficulties which they face in your country today, they are called to carry out this mission in a spirit of openness to all, regardless of origin, social status or religion. Another important consideration is the human, cultural and religious formation of educators: for it is this formation which will ensure that values are handed on. The witness of one's life is in itself an essential element of the truth which Catholic schools impart.

8. In contemporary society, marriage and the family are the object of threats which tend to destroy or at least to distort them, thus putting the very balance of society at risk. It is therefore urgently necessary to strengthen a catechesis that will shed light on the greatness and dignity of conjugal love in God's plan, as well as on the requirements that flow from it. The faithful must have a renewed awareness of the fact that in the sacrament of marriage they receive a particular grace

meant to perfect their love and to strengthen their unity and indissolubility as a couple. Through this grace, whose source is Christ, they help one another to attain holiness in their married life and in welcoming and educating their children (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1641).

I am delighted with the witness of fidelity and dynamism given by many happy Christian homes, who thus become living examples of united families, open to others and showing solidarity with their problems. I therefore encourage you, with your priests and the leaders of the family apostolate in your Dioceses, vigorously to continue the efforts you have made to help Christians, particularly the young, to accept the values of married and family life as well as to guide them in their preparation for Christian marriage and later in their lives as married couples and parents. Moreover, the whole ecclesial community is responsible for promoting the evangelization of the family, which is called to grow as a community of life and love, "a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride" (Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 17).

9. Your Dioceses have already made important efforts to inculturate the Christian faith, especially in the liturgy and in catechesis. The way of living the faith is always permeated by the culture of one's surroundings. Thus we can say that "the challenge of inculturation in Africa consists in ensuring that the followers of Christ will ever more fully assimilate the Gospel message, while remaining faithful to all authentic African values" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 78). This task is a daily duty to be carried out with perseverance so that everyone can receive the Gospel in the depths of his being and make it bear abundant fruit.

Cameroon is a land of encounter, rich in its different cultures. The proclamation of the Gospel in each of them thus demands that Christians be ready to bring them the truth revealed by God in his Son, who came to share our human nature. This does not prevent cultures from keeping an identity of their own and does not create divisions within them, for the Christian faith fosters in them everything that is open to the acceptance of the full truth. It also invites respect for their diversity, seeing in it a sign of the abundance of gifts that God gives to every people.

From this perspective, it is crucial for the proclamation of the Gospel in society to adopt an authentic pastoral approach to the world of culture. In an age which often experiences the loss of a sense of moral values and an apprehension about the future, the Church's role is to show the fruitfulness of faith in the development of cultures. In particular, be concerned to make the Gospel present in the heart of the cultural, university and intellectual milieus of your country, so that it can be a source of renewal and spiritual growth for everyone's good.

10. In the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, I expressed my hope that the third year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, dedicated to God the Father, would lead to more intense interreligious dialogue, according to the guidelines of the Council's Declaration *Nostra aetate* (n. 53). In your country, relations with the other religious traditions are generally

peaceful. You should make the most of this favourable time, then, to increase among Catholics and those who do not share their faith, especially believers in Islam, a truly fraternal and respectful spirit which will enable them to work together for integral development and justice. May this same harmonious spirit also inspire your relations with members of the African Traditional Religion. In fact, "the light of Christ brings fresh life and opens people's hearts to others. Animated by the love which comes from God, Christians treat all their brothers and sisters with genuine friendship and esteem" (*Address in Yaoundé*, 15 September 1995). In this spirit, it becomes clearer that the effective recognition by all of the right to religious freedom, which is at the root of the human person's other rights, can only encourage the building of a united and fraternal nation and help to maintain peace and understanding among all its communities.

11. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of this meeting I would very much like to invite Cameroon's young people not to be discouraged as they face the future, repeating the appeal I have frequently made to African young people: take in hand the development of your country, love the culture of your people and work for its renewal with fidelity to your cultural heritage, through a sharpening of your scientific and technical expertise, and above all through the witness of your Christian faith (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 115)! And you adults, help them take their place in the life of the nation and the Church!

As the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 approaches, I engage all the faithful of Cameroon, united with their Bishops in faith and charity, to make this time of grace a time of intense spiritual renewal and vigorous missionary commitment, so that the love of God the Father, revealed in his Son Jesus, in communion with the Holy Spirit, will be proclaimed to all humanity.

I entrust each of your Dioceses and your whole nation to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of mankind, that she may guide you on the paths that lead to her divine Son. I wholeheartedly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and extend it to the priests, religious, catechists and all the lay faithful of your Dioceses.