



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE BISHOPS OF MALAWI IN THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. I give thanks to the Father of all mercies for the gift of this meeting with you, the Bishops of Malawi, on the occasion of your pilgrimage to Rome for your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. With great joy I welcome you and, through you, I embrace all the Malawi faithful, whom I remember with affection in the Lord and who remain always in my prayers. In a special way as the nation prepares to celebrate the centenary of the establishment of the first Catholic mission on your soil, I pray for you, the Shepherds of God's Holy People, and for the priests, Religious and laity that, in the words of Saint Paul, "God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfill every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in him" (2 Th 1:11-12).

2. With the founding of the mission at Nzama in 1901, the Christian faith took root in Malawi and has continued to grow there ever since. The numbers of those added day by day to the Lord is steadily increasing (cf. Acts 2:47), and the Church herself is increasingly involved in the life of the nation, insisting upon the need for solidarity and civic responsibility, and urging dialogue and reconciliation as the way to resolve tensions. The relations between Church and State are good, and the Church is free to pursue her spiritual mission in the fields of pastoral ministry, education, health care and human and social development.

It is also widely recognized that the Church has played an important role in Malawi's transition to democratic government. But the process of transition is not yet complete, and the Church must continue to work with all sectors of society in an effort to ensure that the nation does not go astray in its attempts to build a just, stable and lasting democracy. This will depend upon the quality of the foundation that is laid; and the one sure basis for a democratic society is a right vision of the human person and of the common good. Unless a society builds upon this truth, then it is like the house built on sand: it cannot stand (cf. Mt 7:26-27). It is the Church's solemn duty to declare this truth, to identify the human values which flow from it, and to remind everyone of the duty to act accordingly.

3. The challenges to Christian life and service are many and demanding in a situation of widespread poverty, often extreme, and where there is a weakening of moral and ethical conviction, giving rise to many social ills, including corruption and attacks upon the sanctity of human life itself. In light of this, there is a need to provide the faithful with solid programmes of evangelization and catechesis, aimed at deepening their Christian faith and understanding, and thus enabling them to take their rightful place in the Church and in society. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us: “The laity. . . are called by God so that led by the spirit of the Gospel they might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties” (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). The Council Fathers go on to say that “all the faithful of Christ. . . are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. . . All of Christ’s followers are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfilment of their own state of life” (*ibid.*, 40, 42). For this to happen, the words addressed by the Council to the Bishop should be borne constantly in mind: “Let him be a good shepherd who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him. Let him be a true father who excels in the spirit of love and solicitude for all... Let him so gather and mold the whole family of his flock that everyone, conscious of his own duties, may live and work in the communion of love” (*Christus Dominus*, 16).

In this perspective I gladly encourage the initiatives you have taken to prepare for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and for the celebration in 2001 of the Catholic Church’s centenary in Malawi, both of which anniversaries imply a call to strengthen Christian faith and commitment. In your 1996 Pastoral Letter, *Walking Together in Faith*, you issued a timely call for conversion and for renewal in Christian living. Looking to these two moments of special grace, you heeded the exhortation of my Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* and “opened your hearts to the promptings of the Spirit, who does not fail to arouse enthusiasm and lead people to celebrate the Jubilee with renewed faith and generous participation” (cf. No. 59). Following the recommendations of the Special Assembly of Africa of the Synod of Bishops and those found in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, you devised a programme of preparation to help the priests, Religious and faithful of your Dioceses “to obtain the light and assistance necessary for...the celebration of the forthcoming Jubilee” (*ibid.*). This was reinforced by your Pastoral Letter *Come Back to Me and Live*, in which you rightly stressed the need to recover a sense of sin in order to recover a sense of the mercy of God which is the heart of the Great Jubilee. Indeed, this is the vision of life that is at the heart of the Gospel and which the Church is called to preach in every time and place.

4. As the announcement of the Good News is completed through catechesis, faith grows to maturity and Christ’s disciples are formed in a thorough and systematic knowledge of the person and message of the Lord (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 19). Bible study, direct contact, that is, with the sacred text of God’s word, 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 lay men and women are secure in their faith and prepared to fulfil its demands in all circumstances, not least of all in the crucial areas of Christian marriage and family life. Undoubtedly, one of the clearest signs of the “newness” of life in Christ is the bond of marriage

and the family lived in accordance with the Saviour's call for the restoration of God's original plan (cf. *Mk* 10:6- 9). Good 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 a difficult economic and social situation.

As they are strengthened in the revealed truth, Catholics will also be able to respond to the objections raised with increasing frequency by the followers of sects and new religious movements. Moreover, firm and humble submission to the word of Christ, as authentically proclaimed by the Church, also forms the basis for dialogue with the followers of African traditional religion and Islam, and for your relationship with other Churches and ecclesial communities, which is so important if Christian mission is not to be impaired by division in the future as it has been in the past (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 34).

5. Given the vital importance of good leadership in the Church, especially at a time such as this, I wish to encourage your efforts to ensure a more effective formation for your seminarians and priests. This remains an issue of critical importance for your local Churches and it requires direction from you, since without sound formation priests will not be equipped to fulfil their vocation and ministry, giving themselves daily "in order that faith, hope and charity may grow in human hearts and in the history of the men and women of our time" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 82).

You have made great efforts to strengthen formation programmes and to provide a solid spiritual, intellectual and pastoral training for your seminarians; and the fruits of this are already beginning to appear. The *Ratio Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, the *Ratio Studiorum* and the rules for seminary living have been approved for the Major Seminaries of Kachebere, Zomba and Mangochi. Furthermore, the introduction of a programme of spirituality and a propaedeutic year for seminarians before they commence the study of philosophy, as well as the establishment of a Board of Governors for formation and for problems related to seminary life and discipline, are all very positive developments.

No less important than the training of future priests is the permanent formation of those already in Holy Orders. Pastoral dedication and zeal for the ministry, moral discipline and upright behaviour, detachment from worldly possessions and attitudes, readiness to give themselves completely in service to others: these are the traits which must be nurtured in your priests and become the hallmark of their lives. Then they will be, as Saint John Chrysostom insists the priest must be, "dignified yet modest, impressive yet kindly, masterful yet approachable, impartial yet courteous, humble but not servile, forceful yet gentle" (*On the Priesthood*, 3, 15), considering "one thing alone: the edification of the Church, never acting out of hostility or favour" (*ibid.*). To this end, it is imperative that there be effective programmes of permanent formation for the clergy. This must be very high among your priorities for the Church in Malawi as she prepares to enter the Third Millennium, for Bishops have a crucial responsibility to provide opportunities for spiritual renewal and growth among their priests (cf. *Optatam Totius*, 22).

6. The need for lifelong formation also applies to men and women Religious. Theirs is a special consecration which needs constantly to be deepened so that they may remain firmly rooted in Christ and the high ideals of their vocation may continue undimmed in their own hearts and in the eyes of the people to whom they are a special sign of God's loving care. Through the profession of the evangelical counsels, they bear witness to the Kingdom and build up the Body of Christ by leading others to conversion and a life of holiness. They must be helped to remain faithful to the charism of their Institutes and to work in close cooperation and harmony with you, the Pastors of the Church, in carrying out their apostolate (cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, 8).

A life of chastity, poverty and obedience willingly embraced and faithfully lived confutes the conventional wisdom of the world, because it is a proclamation of the Cross of Christ (cf. *1 Cor* 1:20-30). The witness offered by consecrated women and men can transform society and its ways of thinking and acting, precisely through the love which they show for all people, especially those with no voice, through their focus on the things of the spirit rather than on material things, and through their prayer, their dedication and their example. How can we not offer here a word of appreciation for the magnificent work done by men and women Religious in Malawi in the areas of human development, education and health care? It is a unique contribution which neither the Church nor the nation could do without.

7. Dear Brothers, as Shepherds of God's Holy People you have the triple task of leading, challenging and uniting all those who are working in "God's field" (*1 Cor* 3:9). This task of yours is more pressing than ever as the Third Millennium prepares to dawn and as you look to the celebration of the centenary of the Catholic Church in Malawi, remembering the Lord's words about the abundance of the harvest to be reaped through our service of the Gospel (cf. *Mt* 9:37). On the eve of the Great Jubilee we are called to dedicate ourselves with fresh vigour to the work of sharing the light of Christ's truth with all men and women. I pray that through your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul the Holy Spirit will strengthen you for the work of the new evangelization. In the love of the Blessed Trinity, I entrust you, your priests, Religious and lay faithful to the glorious intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, and I impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and peace in her divine Son.

From the Vatican, 6 September 1999