



The Holy See

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

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. It gives me great joy to welcome you who are responsible for the pastoral care of the Catholic Church in Burundi at this important moment in your episcopal ministry, your *ad limina* visit. You have come to pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul to increase within yourselves the apostolic zeal that motivated them and brought them here to be witnesses to Christ's Gospel, willingly making the total gift of their lives. In meeting the Bishop of Rome and his assistants, you also express your communion with the Successor of Peter and with the universal Church. May the Lord bless your steps and support you in your service to the people who have been entrusted to you!

The President of your Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Simon Ntamwana, has sketched a moving picture of the Church's situation in Burundi on your behalf. I cordially thank him. Through you I affectionately greet the priests, religious, catechists and lay people of your Dioceses. May the Lord give them strength and daring to be vigilant witnesses of God's love among their brethren in all circumstances! Please also convey to all your compatriots my warm wishes that peace and prosperity will soon return to the whole country!

2. The vitality of the Catholic Church in Burundi is indeed remarkable. Your quinquennial reports show in a significant way the signs of spiritual renewal, which are becoming more and more evident in the life of your Dioceses and the religious communities which work there. The pastoral guidelines you have zealously adopted to guide your faithful to Christ are already bearing

encouraging fruits, for which I am delighted.

Indeed, in recent years your country has endured a tragic situation. Once again I would like to entrust the victims of violence to divine mercy and to express my deep solidarity with all who are suffering the consequences of the drama your country has undergone. You yourselves, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, have borne these events with great strength of mind. Like the Apostle Paul, you willingly faced all danger out of concern and love for your diocesan Churches and your people (cf. 2 Cor 11: 26). Here I pay tribute to the memory of Archbishop Joachim Ruhuna of Gitega, a victim of the violence he opposed with all his strength. With you the entire Catholic community has been harshly tried: its priests, men and women religious and lay people, who remained steadfast in their trials, sometimes to the point of giving their lives. Among all these Gospel witnesses the young seminarians of Buta, by their heroic sacrifice, have given a magnificent example of brotherhood in the Lord's name, which will remain such for future generations. I fervently thank the Pastors, pastoral workers and all the faithful of Burundi for their courage and fidelity to Christ and the Church.

Despite countless difficulties, your country's Catholics have kept alive their faith in the presence of the Lord, who will never abandon them and never ceases to guide them. The celebration of the first centenary of evangelization last year was a striking sign of their vitality and hope for the future. At this privileged moment in her history, the Church has wished solemnly to show her commitment to the path of reconciliation and peace, wishing to mark the beginning of a new era for all Burundians by making an active contribution to it. May this anniversary be for all the faithful a source of dynamism for the new evangelization of their country!

3. In your often very demanding episcopal ministry, you find help and support in your priests, your closest co-workers. In fact, you are joined to them by a close bond based on sharing in the one priesthood of Christ and on the same apostolic mission. "The priest's relationship with his Bishop in the one presbyterate, his sharing in the Bishop's ecclesial concern, and his devotion to the evangelical care of the People of God in the specific historical and contextual conditions of a particular Church are elements which must be taken into account in sketching the proper configuration of the priest and his spiritual life" (Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 31). For the development of this effective communion, which is indispensable to the Church's life, I encourage you to draw closer to your priests, sharing with them the joys and sorrows, the concerns and hopes of their life and ministry. In their daily problems may they find in you an attentive father who, with an attitude of love and dialogue, can guide and encourage them and, at times when necessary, take the appropriate decisions for their good and that of the faithful.

I extend a most cordial greeting to each of your diocesan priests. I know how devoted they are to the service of the Church and her mission. I urge them to be ever more keenly aware that the priestly vocation involves a specific call to holiness. Through their ordination priests are configured to Christ the Head and Shepherd of his Church, which obliges them to a life marked by

the actions of Jesus, the faithful Servant who finds his joy and happiness in fulfilling his Father's will and the mission entrusted to him. May they reserve an essential place in their life to prayer and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Penance, persevering in their search for a genuine personal encounter with the Lord! Remembering that they have been given the responsibility of gathering and leading the People of God, they themselves must be models of Christian life who help believers to grow in faith and to accept one another in order to build the Church, the Family of God. Throughout their lives, and in particular through celibacy welcomed as a precious gift of God that they have really accepted, may they bear witness to an undivided love for Christ and his Church, with full and joyful commitment to their pastoral ministry (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 50)! In this spirit it is your duty to talk to them clearly and firmly about the demands of priestly life. Lastly, I urge them in season and out of season to be ardent messengers of the love of God, who makes no distinctions between people, whatever their origins or social status.

To prepare candidates to live all the demands of their priestly commitment with a deep interior life and a spirit of detachment from whatever is incompatible with the life of a consecrated person, the human, intellectual, pastoral, spiritual and human formation provided at the seminary becomes very important. Christians should also be taught the true significance of the priestly and religious vocation, so that they will become aware of their responsibility to pray for future priests and religious and to help them regard their vocation as a generous service asked of them for the good of the Church and the world, rather than as a form of social advancement. To combat social problems, I ask you to see that the themes of justice and peace are vigorously addressed, in accordance with the principles of the Church's social teaching. In this way future pastors will be able to help the younger generation to understand that justice is far more than a mere claim by one ethnic group against another.

4. Catechists have an important place in the evangelization of your country. In recent years in certain regions, because of the lack of priests, they have been the only pastoral workers to remain in place. They have been able to assemble the faithful and pass on the faith. In the Church's name, I express my gratitude to them all, and invite them to continue their generous service in communion with their Bishops and priests, so that the name of Christ can still be proclaimed and accepted. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, you are taking great care to help and support them: may they always find in you Pastors who are close to them in their concerns and ready to give them the doctrinal and spiritual formation that will enable them to be competent and effective co-workers in evangelization!

The promotion of basic Christian communities is also an essential element of your pastoral work for the Church's renewal. These communities, where the Good News is received and passed on to others, are places where all are committed "to living Christ's love for everyone, a love which transcends the limits of the natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups" (Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 89). This is why their members need to be given a sound formation in prayer, in listening to God's word and in the truths of the faith, and they must be

encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities more and more effectively as baptized and confirmed persons in the Church and in society.

5. The responsibility of Christians to work towards re-establishing peaceful and reconciled relations among all the members of the nation must lead them to see that, if this is to be achieved in a lasting way, justice must be guaranteed for all. Thus there must be a clear awareness that all human beings have the same dignity, deserve the same respect, are equal and enjoy the same rights and duties. As I wrote in my *Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace*: "Peace for all of us comes from the justice of each of us. No one is excused from a task of such importance for the whole of humanity. It concerns every man and every woman, each according to his or her own competence and responsibility" (n. 7; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 17/24 December 1997, p. 4). Moreover, when public authorities, in the name of their own responsibility, have to impose punishment, justice must always be in conformity with the dignity of the person and thus with God's plan for man and society. As I wrote in my Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*: "The nature and extent of punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon" (n. 56). One can only deplore the excessive number of cases in which the death penalty is sought. My thoughts thus turn to the many prisoners who are victims of the slowness of judicial procedures, in the hope that they will see their cases tried without delay and their defence properly guaranteed. It is important to mobilize all the forces of society so that there is always hope despite problems, and that people can serve their sentence with respect for their dignity and have the opportunity to correct themselves and mend their ways. In the present circumstances, your episcopal ministry requires you to be vigilant in this area. I acknowledge your efforts, especially through the Justice and Peace Commission, to make justice triumph and prevail over hatred and the desire for revenge, and to see that everyone is given a genuine education in justice and peace.

In fact, the promotion of justice among peoples and within each human community is an integral part of Gospel witness. I therefore strongly encourage you in your concern to help your communities to be more and more intensely committed to building a new society based on justice and fraternal solidarity, with harmony among all its members. It is urgently necessary for each person to be formed in moral and civic values from the very first years of school, with an acute sense of the rights and duties of human individuals and communities. In teaching justice, one is teaching peace. To all who aspire to justice and peace, and particularly to young people, I forcefully repeat: "Always keep alive the quest for these ideals, and have the patience and persistence to pursue them whatever the concrete situation in which you find yourselves.... Value what is right and true, even when to do so requires sacrifice and commits you to going against the current!" (*Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace*, n. 7; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 17/24 December 1997). With you, I urge Catholics and people of good will to overcome evil with good (cf. *Rom* 12: 21) by acts of brotherly love which alone can allow the country to have a future, restore trust to the citizenry and create relations which offer real hope. I also encourage you to take an ever more active stance against violence, whatever its origin.

To enable all the members of the People of God to walk with determination on this path, I invite you to give a preferential place to teaching the Church's social doctrine. It is particularly important that lay Catholics become involved in public life, in order to be "the salt of the earth" by vigorously bearing witness in their daily activities to the love and justice of God. Their commitment today is of great importance, when a new constitutional system is being sought to build a united and harmonious nation, by overcoming hostilities and accepting differences as riches for the good of all.

6. The events your country has endured have led many people to experience life in refugee camps and as displaced persons. Unfortunately, this situation still exists. Of course, the solution to this serious human problem will come primarily through the restoration of peace, reconciliation and economic development. In Christ's name, the Church, through her often very limited charitable resources, must help to alleviate this great suffering and misery. However she cannot forget the fundamental message she has received from her Lord, which Jesus solemnly proclaimed at the beginning of his mission, repeating Isaiah's words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (cf. *Lk* 4: 18-21). And he added: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". It is therefore imperative for the Church to remember this essential aspect of her evangelizing mission, and for Catholics, together with other Christians, to be encouraged to be inventive in fostering attitudes of living solidarity and active participation which vividly show that all are members of one body, recalling the words of the Apostle Paul: "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 *Cor* 12: 26).

In presenting the Church as the People of God and the Body of Christ, the Second Vatican Council gives us highly significant images that should help her members foster attitudes of solidarity and brotherhood in the Christian communities. In this same perspective, the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops employed the key idea of the Church as the Family of God to express the Church's nature in an appropriate way for Africa. Thus the Fathers stressed that none of the Church's members, whatever his place, can be excluded from the common table of sharing, or from the responsibility of living in real solidarity with his brothers and sisters.

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, having come to the end of our meeting, I turn again to your beloved country to urge all its sons and daughters, each at his or her own level of responsibility, to be firmly committed to building a society based on harmony and reconciliation. I fervently hope that sincere and fruitful dialogue will be pursued among all Burundians and will lead to lasting peace, so that everyone can finally live in security and rediscover the paths of prosperity and happiness. May God open hearts to his Spirit of love and peace! May Christ's disciples turn to the Father of all mercy, in an attitude of profound conversion and intense prayer, to ask him for the strength and courage to be tireless builders of peace and brotherhood with all people of good will.

As we are on the eve of entering the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I ardently wish that this time

of grace will be a new springtime of Christian life for the Church in Burundi, to enable her to respond boldly to the Spirit's call. I entrust your ministry and the life of your ecclesial communities to the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, so that she may guide your steps to her Son. I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and extend it to the priests, religious, catechists and all the faithful of your Dioceses.

Castel Gandolfo, 10 September 1999