



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE BISHOPS FROM THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT TO ROME**

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 27 January 2006*

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

I am pleased to offer you my fraternal greetings at the time when you are making your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. In coming to strengthen the bonds of communion with the Bishop of Rome and thereby with the entire Episcopal College, you wish to show your attachment, and that of all your faithful, to the Successor of Peter. I hope that your common prayer at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and your meetings with the Roman Curia will bring you joy and comfort in your ministry and give you new enthusiasm.

I greet with affection the Pastors and faithful of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Kinshasa, Mbandaka-Bikoro and Kananga, in which you are responsible for building up the Body of Christ and guiding the People of God. At a time when Catholics of the Democratic Republic of the Congo along with all people of good will are preparing to live events important to their Nation's future, I would like to express my spiritual closeness to you, raising to the Lord a fervent prayer that they may persevere with firm hope in building peace and brotherhood!

In recent years your Country has lived through lethal conflicts leaving deep scars in peoples' memories. During this tragedy that especially affected the eastern part of your Country, you did not fail to deplore the extortions committed by using strongly-worded messages, calling on local leaders to demonstrate responsibility and courage so that the peoples might live in peace and security.

I encourage the Bishops' Conference to make a unanimous and daring effort to remain vigilant in

order to guide the progress underway.

Important periods of ecclesial life have marked these years. You recalled, Your Eminence, the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation. You also mentioned the year 2005, in which the 10th anniversary of the publication of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* was celebrated. In convoking this Assembly, Pope John Paul II desired to foster an organic pastoral solidarity throughout the African Continent, so that the Church might bring a credible message of faith, hope and charity to all people of good will for a new missionary impetus in the particular Churches. At a time when some Dioceses are celebrating the centenary of their evangelization, I hope that each one of you will make the effort to stress the centrality of the Gospel and in so doing, the pastoral consequences for the life of the local communities, in order to renew the apostolic zeal of pastors and faithful so that moral, spiritual and material reconstruction will unite communities in a single family, as a sign of brotherhood for your contemporaries.

The Church carries out her prophetic mission of proclaiming the Gospel with courage and enthusiasm, paying ever greater attention to the call of the Spirit and in ever closer intimacy with Christ. This mission, to which the Risen Lord calls his disciples who cannot shirk it, is yours in a special way, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, because "the Bishop's work of evangelization, aimed at leading men and women to faith or to strengthening the faith within them, is an outstanding manifestation of his spiritual fatherhood" (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 26).

I therefore encourage you, by your example and the transparency of your life closely united to Christ, *to proclaim Christ's Gospel tirelessly and to allow yourselves to be renewed by him*, remembering that the Church lives on the Gospel, never ceasing to find in it directions for her journey.

Only if each one of the faithful allows his or her personal and community life to be joined to the Word of Christ, who asks for a personal and adult response of faith through authentic and lasting conversion with a view to social fruitfulness and brotherhood among all, can the Gospel profoundly illumine their consciences and transform cultures from within. May your charity, humility and simplicity of life also be a stimulating witness for your priests and faithful, so that they may all progress in truth on the path of holiness.

You emphasize the need to bring about an in-depth evangelization of the faithful. *The living Ecclesial Communities*, present in every corner of your Dioceses, clearly reflect this local evangelization; it makes the faithful ever more mature in their faith, in a spirit of evangelical brotherhood which encourages all of them to try to think together about the various aspects of ecclesial life, especially prayer, evangelization, attention to the poorest people and the self-funding of parishes.

These communities are also a valuable defence against the attack of the sects, which exploit the

gullibility of the faithful and lead them astray by proposing a false vision of salvation and of the

In this perspective I encourage you *to be extremely careful about the quality of the continuing formation of community leaders*, especially catechists, whose devotion and ecclesial spirit I praise, and to ensure that they possess the spiritual, intellectual and material conditions that enable them to carry out as well as possible their mission under their Pastors' responsibility.

Be very careful also that these living Ecclesial Communities are truly missionary, not only eager to welcome Christ's Gospel, but also to bear witness to it to others. Nourished by Christ's Word and by the Sacraments of the Church, the faithful will find the necessary joy and strength for a courageous witness of Christian hope.

Especially in these times which are particularly crucial for your Country, may you *remind the lay faithful of the urgent need for them to take on the renewal of the temporal order*, calling them "to bring to bear upon the social fabric an influence aimed at changing not only ways of thinking but also the very structures of society, so that they will better reflect God's plan for the human family" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 54).

My thoughts turn affectionately to all your priests, diocesan priests and those who belong to religious institutes, collaborators of the order of Bishops established by Christ as ministers at the service of the People of God and all people.

I am aware of the difficult conditions in which many of them exercise their mission. I thank them for their often heroic service with a view to the spiritual growth of their communities. Show them your closeness by your permanent presence in your Dioceses. Also develop your capacity for trusting dialogue with them, making yourselves attentive to their human, intellectual and spiritual growth, so that, through the search for holiness in the exercise of their ministry itself, they may be authentic educators in the faith and models of charity for the faithful.

It is also your task to urge your priests to strive for excellence in their spiritual and moral life. In particular, you should remind them of the unique bond that links the priest to Christ. Its depth and vitality are expressed by priestly celibacy lived in perfect chastity. You should also see to their continuing formation so that they may penetrate ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ. May they enlighten the conscience of the faithful and build solid missionary communities rooted in and centred on the Eucharist, at which they preside in Christ's Name. "All priests share with the Bishops the one identical priesthood and ministry of Christ. Consequently, the very unity of their consecration and mission requires their hierarchical union with the order of Bishops" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 7).

In this perspective, I also encourage you *to develop increasingly the bonds of communion in the heart of your diocesan presbyterate*. As you pointed out in your quinquennial reports, long drawn

out conflicts have sometimes had a negative effect on the unity of this presbyterate, encouraging the development of tribalism and power struggles that can be disastrous for building up the Body of Christ and are sources of confusion for the faithful.

I urge each one to rediscover that deep priestly brotherhood which is proper to ordained ministers, in order to achieve the unity that attracts people to Christ. Encourage your priests to help one another to practise fraternal charity, proposing to them in particular certain forms of community life that will help them grow together in holiness, faithful to their vocation and mission and in full communion with you.

It is your task *to pay constant attention to the quality of the formation of future priests*. I give thanks with you for the generosity of many young men who, having heard Christ's call to serve him as priests in the Church, have been admitted to the seminaries to continue their discernment. However, it is important - it is a pastoral requirement for the Bishop, the first representative of Christ in priestly formation - *that the Church exercise increasingly her grave responsibility in the discernment and guidance of priestly vocations*.

This is especially true in the choice of formation teachers, whose demanding work I take this opportunity to praise. Under the rector's authority, the seminary community is built up around them. May their human and spiritual maturity, their love for the Church and their pastoral wisdom help them carry out with justice and dependability the beautiful mission of ascertaining the spiritual, human and intellectual capacities of priesthood candidates.

To conclude, I make my own the remarks through which the Synod Fathers very rightly conveyed what they felt should be fundamental attitudes to be acquired for a fruitful priestly ministry: "There is need to form future priests in the true cultural values of their country, in a sense of honesty, responsibility and integrity... in such a manner that they will [be]... solidly spiritual, ready to serve, dedicated to evangelization, capable of administering the goods of the Church efficiently and openly, and of living a simple life as befits their milieu" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 95).

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of our meeting I invite you to hope. The Good News has been proclaimed in your Land for more than a century.

I thank the Lord for the generous work of all the agents of evangelization, including numerous missionaries who made the implantation and growth of your Church possible. I ask you today to continue courageously the evangelization that your predecessors began.

May God's Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo never lose the joy of believing and of making known the Gospel of Christ the Saviour! May your communities, sustained by the witnesses of faith in your Country, especially Bl. Marie Clémentine Anwarite Nengapeta and Bl. Isidore Bakanja, be the prophetic signs of a humanity renewed by Christ, a humanity set free from

resentment and fear.

As I entrust you to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, I very gladly impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the priests, men and women religious, catechists and faithful of your Dioceses.

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