



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO BENIN

18-20 NOVEMBER 2011

**MEETING WITH GOVERNMENT MEMBERS
REPRESENTATIVES OF STATE INSTITUTIONS,
DIPLOMATIC CORPS AND MAJOR RELIGIONS**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Presidential Palace of Cotonou

Saturday, 19 November 2011

[Video]

Mr President,

Distinguished civil, political and religious authorities,

Distinguished heads of the diplomatic missions,

Dear Brother Bishops, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

[Solemn greeting in Fon] DOO NOUM!!

Mr President, you have given me the opportunity of this encounter with this distinguished gathering of personalities. I appreciate this privilege, and I offer you my heartfelt thanks for the kind words which you have just expressed to me in the name of all the people of Benin. I also thank the representative of the institutions present for her words of welcome. Allow me to express my best wishes for all of you who are among the foremost protagonists, in various ways, of Benin's national life.

Speaking on other occasions, I have often joined the word *hope* to the word *Africa*. I did so in Luanda two years ago as well as in reference to the Synod. The word *hope* is also found several

times in the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* which I am shortly going to sign. When I say that Africa is a continent of hope, I am not indulging in mere rhetoric, but simply expressing a personal conviction which is also that of the Church. Too often, our mind is blocked by prejudices or by images which give a negative impression of the realities of Africa, the fruit of a bleak analysis. It is tempting to point to what does not work; it is easy to assume the judgemental tone of the moralizer or of the expert who imposes his conclusions and proposes, at the end of the day, few useful solutions. It is also tempting to analyze the realities of Africa like a curious ethnologist or like someone who sees the vast resources only in terms of energy, minerals, agriculture and humanity easily exploited for often dubious ends. These are reductionist and disrespectful points of view which lead to the unhelpful “objectification” of Africa and her inhabitants.

I am aware that words do not always mean the same thing everywhere; but the meaning of hope differs little from culture to culture. A few years have now passed since I dedicated an encyclical letter to Christian hope. To talk of hope is to talk of the future and hence of God! The future has its roots in the past and in the present. The past we know well, regretting its failures and acknowledging its successes. The present we live as well as we can, I hope, for the best with God’s help! It is upon this mixture of many contradictory and complementary elements that we must build with the help of God.

Dear friends, in the light of this experience which ought to encourage us, I would like to mention two current African realities. The first relates in a general way to the socio-political and economic life of the continent, the second to interreligious dialogue. These realities concern all of us, because this century seems to be coming into being painfully and to struggle to make hope grow in these two particular domains.

During recent months, many peoples have manifested their desire for liberty, their need for material security, and their wish to live in harmony according to their different ethnic groups and religions. Indeed, a new state has been born on your continent. Many conflicts have originated in man's blindness, in his will to power and in political and economic interests which mock the dignity of people and of nature. Human beings aspire to liberty; then to live in dignity; they want good schools and food for their children, dignified hospitals to take care of the sick; they want to be respected; they demand transparent governance which does not confuse private and public interests; and above all they desire peace and justice. At this time, there are too many scandals and injustices, too much corruption and greed, too many errors and lies, too much violence which leads to misery and to death. These ills certainly afflict your continent, but they also afflict the rest of the world. Every people wishes to understand the political and economic choices which are made in its name. They perceive manipulation and their revenge is sometimes violent. They wish to participate in good governance. We know that no political regime is ideal and that no economic choice is neutral. But these must always serve the common good. Hence we are faced with legitimate demands, present in all countries, for greater dignity and above all for greater humanity.

Man demands that his humanity be respected and promoted. Political and economic leaders of countries find themselves placed before important decisions and choices which they can no longer avoid.

From this place, I launch an appeal to all political and economic leaders of African countries and the rest of the world. Do not deprive your peoples of hope! Do not cut them off from their future by mutilating their present! Adopt a courageous ethical approach to your responsibilities and, if you are believers, ask God to grant you wisdom! This wisdom will help you to understand that, as promoters of your peoples' future, you must become true servants of hope. It is not easy to live the life of a servant, to remain consistent amid the currents of opinion and powerful interests. Power, such as it is, easily blinds, above all when private, family, ethnic or religious interests are at stake. God alone purifies hearts and intentions.

The Church does not propose any technical solution and does not impose any political solution. She repeats: do not be afraid! Humanity is not alone before the challenges of the world. God is present. There is a message of hope, hope which generates energy, which stimulates the intellect and gives the will all its dynamism. A former Archbishop of Toulouse, Cardinal Saliège, once said: "to hope is never to abandon; it is to redouble one's activity". The Church accompanies the State and its mission; she wishes to be like the soul of our body untiringly pointing to what is essential: God and man. She wishes to accomplish, openly and without fear, the immense task of one who educates and cares, but above all who prays without ceasing (cf. *Lk 18:1*), who points to God (cf. *Mt 6:21*) and to where the authentic man is to be found (cf. *Mt 20:26*, *Jn 19:5*). Despair is individualistic. Hope is communion. Is not this a wonderful path that is placed before us? I ask all political and economic leaders, as well those of the university and cultural realms to join it. May you also be sowers of hope!

I would now like to touch upon the second point, that of interreligious dialogue. I do not think it is necessary to recall the recent conflicts born in the name of God, or deaths brought about in the name of him who is life. Everyone of good sense understands that a serene and respectful dialogue about cultural and religious differences must be promoted. True interreligious dialogue rejects humanly self-centred truth, because the one and only truth is in God. God is Truth. Hence, no religion, and no culture may justify appeal or recourse to intolerance and violence. Aggression is an outmoded relational form which appeals to superficial and ignoble instincts. To use the revealed word, the Sacred Scriptures or the name of God to justify our interests, our easy and convenient policies or our violence, is a very grave fault.

I can only come to a knowledge of the other if I know myself. I cannot love unless I love myself (cf. *Mt 22:39*). Knowledge, deeper understanding and practice of one's religion, are therefore essential to true interreligious dialogue. This can only begin by sincere personal prayer on the part of the one who desires to dialogue. Let him go in secret to his private room (cf. *Mt 6:6*) to ask God for the purification of reason and to seek his blessing upon the desired encounter. This prayer also asks

God for the gift to see in the other a brother to be loved and, within his tradition, a reflection of the truth which illumines all people (*Nostra Aetate*, 2). Everyone ought therefore to place himself in truth before God and before the other. This truth does not exclude and it is not confusion. Interreligious dialogue when badly understood leads to muddled thinking or to syncretism. This is not the dialogue which is sought.

Despite the steps already taken, we know that sometimes interreligious dialogue is not easy or that it is impeded for various reasons. This does not necessarily indicate failure. There are many forms of interreligious dialogue. Cooperation in social or cultural areas can help people to understand each other better and to live together serenely. It is also useful to know that dialogue does not take place through weakness; we enter into dialogue because we believe in God, the Creator and Father of all people. Dialogue is another way of loving God and our neighbour out of love for the truth (cf. *Mt 22:37*).

Having hope does not mean being ingenuous but making an act of faith in God, the Lord of history, and the Lord of our future. Thus the Catholic Church puts into action one of the intuitions of the Second Vatican Council, that of promoting friendly relations between herself and the members of non-Christian religions. For decades now, the Pontifical Council dedicated to this task has been creating links, holding meetings and publishing documents regularly in order to foster such a dialogue. In this way the Church strives to overcome the confusion of languages and the dispersal of hearts born of the sin of Babel (cf. *Gen 11*). I greet all religious leaders who have kindly come here to meet me. I would like to assure them, as well as those from other African countries, that the dialogue offered by the Catholic Church comes from the heart. I encourage them to promote, above all among the young people, a pedagogy of dialogue, so that they may discover that our conscience is a sanctuary to be respected and that our spiritual dimension builds fraternity. True faith leads invariably to love. It is in this spirit that I invite all of you to hope.

These general ideas may be applied especially to Africa. In your continent, there are many families whose members profess different beliefs, and yet these families remain united. This is not just a unity wished by culture, but it is a unity cemented by a fraternal affection. Sometimes, of course, there are failures, but there are also many successes. In this area, Africa can offer all of us food for thought and thus become a source of hope.

To finish, I would like to use the image of a hand. There are five fingers on it and each one is quite different. Each one is also essential and their unity makes a hand. A good understanding between cultures, consideration for each other which is not condescending, and the respect of the rights of each one are a vital duty. This must be taught to all the faithful of the various religions. Hatred is a failure, indifference is an impasse, and dialogue is an openness! Is this not good ground in which seeds of hope may be sown? To offer someone your hand means to hope, later, to love, and what could be more beautiful than a proffered hand? It was willed by God to offer and to receive. God did not want it to kill (cf. *Gen 4:1ff*) or to inflict suffering, but to care and to help live. Together with

our heart and our intelligence, our hand too can become an instrument of dialogue. It can make hope flourish, above all when our intelligence stammers and our heart stumbles.

According to Sacred Scripture, three symbols describe the hope of Christians: the helmet, because it protects us from discouragement (cf. *1 Th* 5:8), the anchor, sure and solid, which ties us to God (cf. *Heb* 6:19), and the lamp which permits us to await the dawn of a new day (cf. *Lk* 12:35-36). To be afraid, to doubt and to fear, to live in the present without God, or to have nothing to hope for, these are all attitudes which are foreign to the Christian faith (St John Chrysostom, *Homily XIV on the Letter to the Romans*, 6; PG 45, 941 C) and, I am convinced, to all other forms of belief in God. Faith lives in the present, but it awaits future goods. God is in our present, but he is also in the future, a place of hope. The expansion of our hearts is not only hope in God but also an opening to and care for physical and temporal realities in order to glorify God. Following Peter, of whom I am a successor, I hope that your faith and hope will be in God (cf. *1 Pet* 1:21). This is my wish for the whole of Africa, which is so dear to me! Africa, be confident and rise up! The Lord is calling you. May God bless you! Thank you.