



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO NIGERIA, BENIN

GABON AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Lagos (Nigeria)

Friday, 12 February 1982

Praised be Jesus Christ.

1. It is a great joy to be with you all in Lagos. I give thanks to God for this day and for the opportunity of celebrating the Eucharist with you in your own beloved land. I have waited for this moment with great anticipation. I have looked forward to the time when I would gather with the members of the Church in Nigeria. And now I am happy to have this opportunity to get to know you better, to speak to you, to confirm you in the faith, and to pray with you. We are joining our voices in thanksgiving and in praise of the Most Holy Trinity.

2. As I begin these days of my pastoral pilgrimage to your country, I think immediately of the great work of evangelisation which has been carried out among you and which is still happily going on.

God wills all people to be saved, that all should come to share in his gifts of unity and justice, integrity and peace. The origin and foundation of evangelisation is the saving action of God himself, the salvific love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit poured forth upon all mankind. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was sent by his Father. Christ in turn breathed forth his Spirit upon the Apostles and sent them and their successors to bring the Good News of salvation to the people of every age and culture, of every nation and race. It was the Holy Spirit who would inspire all apostolic efforts and bring them to completion. In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of this when he says: "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my

name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you”.

3. And so, in the course of time and according to the deep mystery of God's plan, the Good News of salvation eventually reached Nigeria, coming first to the Kingdom of Benin almost five centuries ago. This first attempt at evangelisation eventually died out. The lasting work of spreading the faith had to wait until 1863, when missionaries of the Society for African Missions reached Lagos. Then, in 1885, the Holy Ghost Fathers reached Onitsha, and, a little later, the Society for African Missions arrived in Lokoja and Shendam.

The courage and heroic efforts of these first missionaries is well known to you. Some of them died within two weeks of their arrival. The others continued to preach Christ with unflinching faith, enduring love and apostolic determination, being continually renewed and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. The result of their labours is the abundant harvest which we see today. They went sowing in tears, and they come back in joy carrying their sheaves. It is because of their dedicated efforts, together with the openness and generous response of your forefathers, that we are assembled here today at the altar of the Lord, professing our one faith in God and giving glory to his holy name.

The acceptance of the Christian faith here in Nigeria has indeed been remarkable. With eager hearts, you have welcomed generations of zealous missionaries to your land. You have learned from them the excellent knowledge of Jesus and have received him into your lives through faith and the Sacrament of Baptism. Nourished by the Eucharist and the word of God, you have begun to live as Christ taught you to do. You have put your faith into practice in your private and public lives, in your families and homes, at work and in places of recreation. You have also offered your youth to Christ and the Church to be trained as priests, brothers, sisters and dedicated laity. Your catechists have, with great success, animated local Catholic communities, taught prayers, hymns and doctrine to young and old, and been indispensable helpers to the priests. The Catholic teachers deserve special recognition. In the early days they sacrificed so much and laboured with such zeal, and remained always loyal to Christ in the service of the Church. Indeed this nation owes much to its faithful teachers. May they never be lacking in your country. Their names are written in the book of life.

The Church in your land is now largely directed by Nigerian bishops and priests, although you continue to give a wholehearted welcome to the important contribution of the missionaries. My presence here today is a tribute to your missionaries, both past and present, and to yourselves, who have accepted the faith and made it your own. But above all we are gathered here to praise the Holy Spirit, the source of life and truth.

4. The work of evangelisation involves a number of activities. It includes preaching the Gospel, helping people to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and conferring baptism and the other sacraments. Another indispensable element is that of silent witness to Christ in the ordinary events

of life and in action for peace and justice.

The silent proclamation of the Gospel through Christian witness in ordinary life is a powerful and effective way of proclaiming Christ. Saint Paul was pointing to this when he exhorted the Colossians: "Be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience.

Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love". Everyone can contribute to the Church's mission in this way. For witness requires simply that we live in an authentic way the faith we have received. It means that we heed Jesus' words: "If any one loves me, he will keep my word".

Action for peace and justice is in fact an important part of witnessing to the Gospel. As followers of Jesus, we not only profess our faith by our words, but we also proclaim it to others by the way we put it into practice. We try, with the Holy Spirit's help, to promote the Kingdom of God and to build a society marked with integrity, unity, justice and peace. What we work for and long for is expressed in the prophecy of Isaiah, as we heard in our first reading: "My people will live in peaceful homes, safe houses, quiet dwellings".

5. I am happy to know that here in Nigeria you have sought to promote the Gospel through authentic witness and action for peace and justice. You, the Nigerian Catholics, have not lived cut off from society. You are indeed very much part and parcel of this country, which you love. You have contributed much to building up Nigeria into the great nation that it is. For example, the Church has promoted schooling, which in its turn has fostered all-round development: social, cultural, political and economic. You have also assisted your brothers and sisters by health care programmes, mobile clinics in the rural areas, maternity homes and hospitals. And you have not forgotten social services for orphans, the old, the handicapped and the poor. Also worthy of special mention are your efforts to help school-leavers to learn such important skills as carpentry, weaving, knitting, motor-mechanics, shoemaking, baby-care and home keeping. In this way you have equipped many young people to face the future with reason for hope. Through these many endeavours you bear witness to Christ who "came not to be served but to serve".

6. Your efforts in ecumenism also deserve special mention. For when you engage in dialogue with other Christians, you are working to carry out the desire of the Second Vatican Council for the restoration of unity among all Christians. This desire of the Council is an expression of Christ's own yearning "that they may all be one". But an even greater contribution to the cause of Christian unity is made through prayer and penance. The conversion of hearts is truly an effective supernatural means. The Council wanted us to understand the power of "spiritual ecumenism" and its relationship to God's gift of unity: "Let all Christ's faithful remember that the more purely they strive to live according to the Gospel, the more they are fostering and even practising Christian unity". I commend you also for your initiatives in working together with the members of other

religions, especially the Muslims, in the promotion of peace, unity and human rights.

7. I rejoice deeply that you have begun to send missionaries to other lands, even before you have labourers enough for your own vineyard. I am happy to know that you have Nigerian priests in Sierra Leone, Liberia, the People's Republic of the Congo, Zambia and, still further field, in Grenada. There is a Nigerian brother in Kenya. And there are sisters in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gabon, Angola, Kenya and Zambia; sisters are serving also in Turin. Another visible sign of your desire to hand on the faith is the establishment in 1977 of your National Missionary Seminary. May God prosper all these efforts.

8. My brothers and sisters in Christ, our faith is indeed a treasure beyond compare; it is the pearl of great price. It is a gift from the Lord to be communicated in turn to others: communicated by authentic witness through our action for justice and peace, communicated by explicit proclamation and through the teaching of catechism and hymns and prayers, communicated by all the members of the Church when they fulfil their personal vocations with a deep sense of joy. With hearts grateful for this gift of our faith, let us seek always to serve the Lord in a spirit of love, holiness and peace.

And through the fidelity of our Christian lives let us proclaim that Jesus is Lord!

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