



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO NIGERIA, BENIN
GABON AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA

MASS FOR THE FAMILIES

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Onitsha (Nigeria)
Saturday, 13 February 1982

With the Apostle Paul I say to you: “You are God’s chosen race, his saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other”.

With these words I greet you, husbands and wives, fathers, mothers and children. I greet you, Nigerian families, and in you I greet the past and the present and the future of the Nigerian people.

The Pope comes to you today in the name of Christ, who prayed for Peter, so that having been strengthened in his faith he might confirm his brethren. I come to you in the name of the Son of God who became man and lived among us, in the heart of a human family. Jesus is close to the joys and sorrows of family life. He understands the family’s hopes and disappointments, and he shares in the events that make up each family’s history.

In this Eucharistic celebration I wish to gather together, as it were, the love, the unity, the compassion, the forgiveness, the patience, the hopes and aspirations, the work, the sufferings and the worries of all the families of Nigeria, in order to offer them as a spiritual sacrifice to our heavenly Father, through his Son Jesus Christ, and in union with Christ’s Sacrifice on the Cross. I wish to pray with you and for you, in order to show Jesus that we believe in the power of love to uproot evil and to banish it from our hearts. I have wished to come among you in order to encourage you to carry out Saint Paul’s instruction to “put on love”, so that the peace of Christ

may reign in your hearts.

1. Brothers and sisters, your families have so many positive and praiseworthy values, based on your family traditions. You have strong family ties. Children are regarded as a blessing and are desired as the crown of marriage. The extended family system provides a loving human environment for the care of orphans, the old and the poor.

There are however some shadows. Traditionally your culture did not exclude polygamy, even though most marriages were and are monogamous. Sometimes women were deprived of some of their rights. And the modern enemies of the family, the disturbing degradation of some fundamental values – divorce, contraception and abortion – have not spared your country.

My appeal and invitation to you, Christian families of Nigeria, is the same appeal and invitation that I addressed to all the Christian families of the world in my recent Apostolic Exhortation “*Familiaris Consortio*”: “Family, become what you are”.

2. The family comes from God. It is the Creator who has arranged the loving covenant of one man and one woman. He has blessed their love and made it a source of mutual help. He has made it fruitful, and established its permanence until death. In the Creator’s plan, the family is a community of persons. Therefore, the fundamental form of life and love within the family lies in respect for each person, for each individual member of the family. Husbands and wives, consider and treat each other with the greatest respect. Parents, respect the unique personality of your children. Children, show your parents obedient respect. All members of the family must feel accepted, and respected, because they must feel loved. In a special way, the old and the sick.

Respect in its deepest sense means fidelity. Respect means acceptance of one another, trust and attachment, patience and forgiveness when necessary, beyond and in spite of personal difficulties, which can never justify a lack of love. Husbands and wives, love each other; sacrifice yourselves for each other and for your children. Resist all temptations to betray each other.

3. Because the love of husband and wife is a unique sharing in the life of God himself, it should be genuinely and generously open to new life. It should be open to all those whose life is diminished or threatened by needs of one kind or another. Christian families of Nigeria, let your example shine before the whole world: stand up for life. Do not accept an anti-life mentality rooted in “a corruption of the idea and the experience of freedom, conceived not as a capacity for realizing the truth of God’s plan for marriage and the family, but as an autonomous power of self-affirmation, often against others, for one’s own selfish well-being”.

You will do a great service to your country, to the Church and to the whole of humanity, if you try in every way possible to safeguard the love for the child that is part of your culture and your family traditions. Love your children as Mary and Joseph loved and protected and educated Jesus.

I know that in your country the childless couple bears a heavy cross, one that has to be borne with courage all through life. To couples who cannot have children of their own I say: you are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of the apostolate, to the needs of the poor, to the needs of orphans, to the needs of the world.

4. And if we now ask Nigerian families: What is your specific contribution to your country? Then again I say: Become what you are, “the first and vital cell of society. It is from the family that citizens come to birth, and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself”. It is the family that takes each man and woman out of anonymity, and makes them conscious of their personal dignity, enriching them with deep human experiences and actively placing them, in their uniqueness, within the fabric of society.

Brothers and sisters, if you love your country, then love your family life. If you wish to avoid having a society that runs the risk of becoming more and more depersonalised and standardized and therefore inhuman and dehumanising, then strengthen the structures of family life. Love your families. Respect them.

And you, young people, prepare yourselves for marriage by prayer, by self-discipline, mutual respect and chastity. For the full and genuine gift of self can only take place in permanent married love.

5. Christian families of Nigeria! Your dignity and responsibility as disciples of Jesus comes from the fact that you are called to be holy, and to help each other, the ecclesial community and the world to become holy. Again we hear Saint Paul’s words from the second reading: “Let the message of Christ in all its richness find home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other in all wisdom”.

Become holy through God’s gifts of faith, hope and love, through personal and family prayer, through loving trust in our heavenly Father, through good example, through the life of grace nourished and sustained in the sacraments. Become holy by taking part in the life of the Church in your local communities, in your parishes, in your dioceses, with respect and love for your priests and bishops. Become holy in the “service of love” – the love of God and of your fellow human beings, especially your families. Become holy, and help make the life and the many activities of your social and national communities holy.

I praise and thank all those who work to promote the family, especially your Bishops and your priests, who celebrate the sacred mysteries, who instruct, bless, advise, console and reconcile. I thank the catechists and all those working in the lay apostolate.

And in a very special way the men and women religious who are living witnesses of true evangelical values.

I am happy to hear of the excellent work being done by the Pro-Life Association of Nigeria (PLAN), in favour of responsible parenthood in accordance with the teachings of the Church. I am also pleased to know of your marriage enrichment programmes. May God bless these initiatives.

I praise all the families that pray together. Nigerian Christian families, the Pope begs you today to increase family prayer, daily family prayer: husbands and wives together, parents with their children.

Be especially devoted to the Rosary. Pray to Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, the Mother of Christian families. God will not fail to bless the family that prays together, in the name of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

6. My brothers and sisters, I am convinced that our meeting here today will be marked by a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God on the Church in Nigeria. I am here among you in obedience to Jesus' command: "Go, make disciples of all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". In a few moments I shall baptize and confirm a group of catechumens representing the different dioceses in Nigeria. The seed planted in this land through the Church's faithful proclamation of the Good News of salvation has borne fruit. Through Jesus Christ, in whom we have redemption through his blood, we have new members in his Body, the Church.

These brothers and sisters will now be cleansed with water by the power of the living Word, which make them sharers in God's own life and his adopted children. They – and all of us together – will profess the Church's faith in the power of the Lord's Passion, death and Resurrection. In Baptism we are not only buried with Christ; we are also raised to life with him, because we believe in the power of God who raised him from the dead.

In Confirmation these brothers and sisters of ours will be strengthened to be active members of the Church and to build up the Body of Christ in faith and love. They will be sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the service of the Church in love.

Brothers and sisters, these sacred rites of Christian initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharistic Sacrifice – remind us that we are all witnesses to Christ. May he stir our hearts to ever greater love.

I pray to him, the Lord of life, for all Nigerian families: for those who are trying to be living witnesses of the faith, for those families who do not share our faith but honour the highest ideals of family life, for families that are divided, for those in difficulty, for widows and for orphans.

May the Holy Family of Nazareth, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, bless all Nigerian families. Amen.

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