



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO NIGERIA, BENIN

GABON AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRIESTS AND SEMINARIANS OF NIGERIA**

Enugu (Nigeria)

Saturday, 13 February 1982

*Dear brother priests,
my dear seminarians,*

"May the peace of Christ reign in your hearts".

I am particularly happy to meet you today, priests and seminarians of Nigeria. You are called to be the immediate co-workers of your bishops. On you, to a large extent, depends the work of evangelization in this land. Permit me to share with you some thoughts on the sacred ministry of the priesthood.

1. The priest is sent by Christ and his Church to proclaim the Gospel of salvation, above all in the celebration of the Eucharist. The priest is ordained to offer the Sacrifice of the Mass, and thus to renew the Paschal Mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a minister of Christ, the priest is called to sanctify the People of God by word and sacrament. He shares the pastoral solicitude of the Good Shepherd, which is frequently expressed in prayer for the flock. As priests, you and I are called to preach and teach the word of God with clarity, lively faith and personal commitment, with orthodoxy, and love. We are called to gather the People of God together, to build the Body of the Church. In accordance with the will of Christ, the priest carries out his apostolate under the leadership of his bishop and in union with his brother priests.

2. Your young Church in Nigeria is full of life and vigour. With apostolic dynamism your missionary priests laid strong foundations through prayer, diligence, chastity and dedication in charity. The local priests and bishops have taken up the mission and consolidated it. Right now you have many initiatives under way to make the Church more and more at home in your culture. I praise you for the harmony with which the Nigerian diocesan priests, the missionary priests and the

Nigerian religious priests work together to advance the Kingdom of Christ.

3. I understand well that most of you are grossly overworked. Some of you parish priests have ten thousand Catholics to serve; some of you may have even many more. There may even be fifteen outstations to a single priest. Most of you celebrate two or three Masses every Sunday in distant places, teach Christian doctrine, and give Eucharistic Benediction.

Your people flock to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You patiently and lovingly discharge this ministry. I understand that in some places all the priests in neighbouring parishes join in a cooperative effort to make this sacrament available. You do this by going together in groups of ten to twenty to your various neighbouring parishes during such peak confession seasons as Christmas and Easter. This, my dear brothers in the priesthood, is an excellent way to fulfil Christ's will to serve his people. You thereby give your parishioners a good choice of confessors and you bear a silent witness to the one priesthood of Christ and to your fraternal solidarity. The Pope rejoices because of your fidelity to this extremely important sacramental ministry, in which Christ's forgiving and healing power touches human hearts.

4. You also pay great attention to the preparation of candidates for the other sacraments and to the general promotion of catechetics. You animate and coordinate the work of catechists, Catholic teachers and other teachers of religion. Your Bishops' Conference has recently emphasized the importance of the catechumenate and has issued directives and letters for the proper carrying out of the sacraments of initiation. Praised be Jesus Christ, who through you and your catechists continues to provide for the deeper rooting of the Church in the power of God's word.

5. I wish to express my esteem of the apostolate of those priests who, in collaboration with their bishops, work at diocesan centres, pastoral and catechetical centres, junior and senior seminaries, in its social services, the Catholic Secretariat in Lagos, schools, colleges, universities, the mass media, mission assignments outside the diocese, both inside and outside and outside of Nigeria, and all such tasks. These priests are serving Christ in vital areas too. The Church needs their particular contribution to her pastoral mission; the aim of all these activities is to evangelize, to communicate Christ.

6. God has blessed Nigeria with many junior and senior seminarians. Indeed your Bigard Memorial Seminary in Enugu and Ikot Ekpene is one of the largest in the world. Your seminary professors have distinguished themselves by their zealous desire to teach the word of God and by sheer hard work. May the Lord reward all those – the laity, religious, priests and bishops – who make this possible. May he bless the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples which gives you moral, financial and technical support.

The high number of your seminarians must never be used as a reason for accepting a lower quality of performance. Of first importance in the seminary must be friendship with Christ centred on the Eucharist and nurtured especially by prayer and meditation on the word of God. This friendship with Christ is authentically expressed in sacrifice, love of neighbour, chastity and apostolic zeal. It likewise demands fidelity to studies and a certain detachment from the things of this world. More spiritual directors are needed for your seminarians. A priest appointed to serve in a seminary should rejoice when this special assignment is given to him. He should strive by word and example to present to the seminarians the highest ideals of the priesthood. What a great privilege it is to help lead young men to a greater knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. Seminarians who are really unsuitable for ordination should be firmly and charitably advised

to follow another vocation.

7. No priest can carry out his ministry well unless he lives in union with Christ. His life, like Christ's, must be marked by self-sacrifice, zeal for the spreading of the Kingdom of God, unblemished chastity, unstained charity. All this is possible only when the priest is a man of prayer and Eucharistic devotion. By praying the Liturgy of the Hours in union with the Church he will find strength and joy for the apostolate. In silent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament he will be constantly renewed in his consecration to Jesus Christ and confirmed in his permanent commitment to priestly celibacy. By invoking Mary the Mother of Jesus, the priest will be sustained in his generous service to all Christ's brothers and sisters in the world. Yes, the priest must not allow the passing needs of the active apostolate to elbow out or eat into his prayer life. He must not be so engrossed with working for God that he is in danger of forgetting God himself. He will remember that our Saviour warned us that without him we can do nothing. Without him, we can fish all night and still catch nothing.

8. No priest can work all by himself. He works with his brother priests and under the leadership of the bishop, who is their father, brother, co-worker and friend. The authentic priest will maintain the love and unity of the presbyterium. He will reverence and obey his bishop as he solemnly promised on ordination day. The presbyterium of the bishop with all his priests, diocesan and religious, should function as a family, as an apostolic team marked with joy, mutual understanding and fraternal love. The presbyterium exists so that, through the renewal of Christ's Sacrifice, the mystery of Christ's saving love may enter the lives of God's people. priests must not forget to help their brother priests who are in difficulty: moral, spiritual, financial or otherwise. And the sick and the old priests find in your warmth of brotherly charity both solace and support.

9. No state of life escapes temptations and you will try to identify your own. By God's grace and with persevering effort, you must strive to resist whatever temptation may come your way: whether, for example, to laxity in discipline, or to laziness, instability, unavailability, too much travelling or dissipation of apostolic energy. Relying on grace, you will reject temptations against celibacy by watchfulness, prayer and mortification. You will refuse to be captured by the attraction of material things and will not put your joy in money, big cars, and a high position in society. Party politics are not for you. It is the proper area of the lay apostolate. Rather you are the chaplains of the laity, who in political matters should assume their own distinctive role. In strengthening you against temptation the Sacrament of Penance has great importance for every priest. Here, for our own lives, we ministers of reconciliation find Christ's healing and sustaining action, his forgiving and merciful love.

10. Nigerians love to study. This is good. Learned priests are required in order to answer the needs of Church and society. Every priest should continue to improve himself by the private study of theology, catechetics and other such sacred sciences. Strive to make time for some such study frequently. When you are ordained and it is a question of going to universities or similar institutes inside or outside Nigeria, this is an assignment to be given only to a certain number of priests, according to diocesan needs and planning, for which the bishops take ultimate responsibility. Do nothing without your bishop, or worse still against him, especially on this point. Priests who have already put themselves into such irregular positions can now retrace their steps and find peace of conscience. In the same way, you will resist the temptation to seek employment anywhere without or against your bishop. We all share in Christ's one priesthood. Let us maintain its unity and love.

11. The priest must be a leaven in the Nigerian community of today. In a country in which many are over-concerned with making money, the priest by word and example must call attention to higher values. Man does not live by bread alone. The priest must identify with the poor, so as to be able to bring them the uplifting Gospel of Christ. Remember that Jesus applied these words to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the Good News to the poor".

Since "evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and men's concrete life", the priest will be deeply concerned with bringing the light of the Gospel and the power of God's word to touch the many different issues of family life, fundamental human rights and duties, justice and peace, development and liberation, culture and learning. He will endeavour to make Christ and the Church present in the fields of the arts and science, culture and the professions. I am particularly happy about the inauguration of the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt, by the Bishops of Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and The Gambia, for the purpose of higher ecclesiastical studies.

The priests who work in the mass media have a wonderful opportunity to share Christ with others, as do the spiritual directors of the religious and laity, the chaplains of all lay apostolate organizations, and the priests who recruit vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. To all of you I say: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him".

Beloved priests and future priests of Nigeria, as Bishop of Rome and your brother priest, I bless you from my heart. I embrace each of you with deep affection in Christ Jesus – the one who is your only Master and your closest friend, and who has loved each one of you with an everlasting love. I commend you all to Mary the Mother of Jesus, our great High Priest.

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