



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA
ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT Thursday 3 September 1987**

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. I am pleased to welcome you, members of the *Episcopal Conference of Nigeria*, for this privileged moment of collegial communion during your *ad Limina* visit. Our assembly today bears witness to the truth that the Lord Jesus willed that Peter and the other Apostles should form an apostolic college and thereby be linked in bonds of unity, charity and peace (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 22). We are gathered here in the name of Jesus, "the chief Shepherd" (Cfr. *Petr.* 5,4), of the Church and the Lord and Saviour of us all. Through him and in the Holy Spirit we give thanks and praise to the Father for the abundant graces and blessings bestowed on the Church in Nigeria. The power of the Gospel has taken root in the hearts of the faithful and enabled the Church to grow.

The kind words of greeting which Cardinal Ekandem has expressed to me on your behalf and that of all your priests, Religious and faithful are deeply appreciated. Each of you represents the members of your local Church and thus I wish to offer through you my cordial greetings and the assurance of my prayerful remembrance to all the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care. In the words of Saint Paul: "I pray that God will bestow on you gifts in keeping with the riches of his glory. May he strengthen you inwardly through the working of his Spirit. May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, and may charity be the root and foundation of your life" (Cfr. *Eph.* 3, 16-17).

2. It is for me a joy at this time to recall the vivid memories of my apostolic visit to Nigeria some five years ago. During my visit I was able to see firsthand the vitality and enthusiasm of the faith of your people. My brief tour filled me with hope for the future of evangelization in your country. As you will remember, it was with the hope that my coming would initiate a new era of evangelization in Nigeria that I undertook the pastoral visit. I am pleased to learn that it has brought about a *new missionary impetus*, a greater pride in the people for their identity as Christians, and the discovery of the need of greater unity on all the levels of pastoral action. It is my repeated prayer that *zeal for evangelization will continue to animate the whole Church in Nigeria*. I wish to praise the many courageous initiatives that you have already undertaken for proclaiming the Gospel and I encourage you, beloved Brothers, to renew your efforts in the great task of evangelization which

constitutes the essential mission of the Church! it is her vocation, it is her deepest identity (Cfr. Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). As I reminded you during my pastoral visit, "In practice the Church's vocation to evangelize means above all living the Gospel more deeply. It means accepting Christ's call to conversion and accepting the demands inherent in the faith preached by Jesus. Understood in this way, evangelization involves a process of purification and interior change that affects our local Churches. It means conversion unto salvation: the ecclesial community becoming ever more a community of living faith, a communion of prayer, a centre of charity radiating concern for the poor and the sick, the lonely, the abandoned, the handicapped, those with leprosy, those who are weak in faith, those who need support and are looking for someone to show them the love of Christ " (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio Laculopoli, ad Nigeriae episcopos habita*, 3, die 15 febr. 1982: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, V, 1 (1982) 463).

3. My dear Brothers: you come from different regions of Nigeria. You bring with you the hopes and aspirations, the joys and sorrows of your priests, Religious and laity. Sharing, as we do, a common pastoral responsibility for these local Churches of yours, I wish to reflect with you briefly on an issue of capital importance, namely, *your unity and concerted action as Bishops*. The Episcopacy is but one ministry in the Church's variety of ministries (*Lumen Gentium*, 18). However, the Episcopal ministry is uniquely endowed with sacred and sacramental power to preside over the Church in service, as Christ provided that his Apostles and their successors should do after his return to the Father (*Ibid.*). Christ gave his Apostles a clear example how he wished them to exercise their authority. Mindful of their human weakness, Christ prayed that they would be confirmed by the Holy Spirit, by one another and in a particular way by Peter. The Lord tells Peter "I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (Cfr. *Luc.* 22, 32).

4. The *College of Bishops serves the unity of the Church* in a special way. The constant underlying theme in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the Episcopacy is unity—a unity of the Bishops with the Successor of Peter, of Bishops with one another, of Bishops and priests, and of Bishops with Religious and laity. As the Council states: "It is the duty of all Bishops to promote and to safeguard the unity of faith and the discipline common to the whole Church..., and, to foster every activity which is common to the whole Church, especially efforts to spread the faith and make the light of the full truth dawn on all people" (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). Even when a Bishop acts alone, he ministers to advance the redemption of all. Thus by preaching Christ, presiding over liturgical worship and administering a local Church, his ministry affects the other local Churches as well. The message, the worship, the administration—all involve the Bishop in realities which go far beyond the boundaries of his own diocese. Surely, the doctrine of collegiality does not lessen the Bishop's special ministry to his own diocese. The local Church must always be the object of the Bishop's service. Through their Bishop, united in the common brotherhood of all the Bishops with the Successor of Peter, the individual members of each local Church are assured of their place in the universal Church.

5. *The Episcopacy is given to the Church by the Lord's divine institution precisely for her unity*. As we contemplate this divine truth, it is my fervent prayer that the brotherhood which you share as Bishops of Nigeria will serve *to further your harmonious actions on the level of your National Episcopal Conference*. It is in the exercise of your fraternity, with all its manifestations, that you

fulfil your ministry to your people, confirm the faith of your fellow Bishops, and keep faith in Christ through Peter. Moreover through your episcopal brotherhood in faith and love you provide the necessary conditions for the progress of the Church in Nigeria, as well as for her effective impact on the civil society of your country, upon our separated Christian brethren and upon the members of non Christian religions. 6. I am aware of the present *difficulties* that you are encountering *in proclaiming the Gospel* and engaging in dialogue with the followers of other religions. You are called each day as Bishops to be a sign of the love of Jesus Christ to all the individuals and groups of whatever religion. As Bishops of Nigeria, where there are an almost equal number of Muslims and Christians and many adherents of traditional African religions, I encourage you "to reaffirm the commitment of the Catholic Church both to dialogue and to the proclamation of the Gospel. There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other. Even in situations where the proclamation of our faith is difficult, we must have the courage to speak of God who is the foundation of that faith, the reason for our hope, and the source of our love" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad Secretariatum pro non Christianis*, 3, die 28 apr. 1987: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, X, 1 (1987) 1450). The teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christians invites all Christians and Muslims to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. They are called to cooperate in the task of securing peace and social justice, freedom and human rights on behalf of all people (Cfr. *Nostra Aetate*, 3). Our dialogue with the Muslims means a readiness to cooperate with others for the betterment of humanity, and a commitment to search together for true peace. 7. My dear Brother: I wish to consider with you the important *role of the Christian family*, "*the domestic Church*", in evangelizing Nigerian society and in building up the Kingdom of God. Already there exists in your culture a great sense of the family bond which can greatly serve the Christian vision of married life in a community of conjugal love. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "Christian spouses, in virtue of the Sacrament of Matrimony, signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and his Church (Cfr. *Eph.* 5, 32). The spouses thereby help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and by the rearing and education of their children" (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 11). Despite the practices of polygamy and divorce, which are accepted by many people today, you *must never grow tired of proclaiming the truth about marriage*. As "a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union, as well as the good of children, imposes total fidelity on the spouses and argues for an unbreakable oneness between them" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48). Thus you are called to insist that the conjugal communion of marriage is characterized by its unity and also by its indissolubility. *The Christian family exercises its role as an evangelizing community in Nigerian society* by believing in the Gospel, steadily maturing in faith and in turn proclaiming the Good News of salvation through the witness of an exemplary Christian life. Such a dedicated witness of Christian family life is already an initial act of evangelization which at some time needs to be accompanied by the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the person of Jesus Christ. Concerning the Christian family's role of evangelization, Pope Paul VI wrote: "The family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family which is conscious of the mission, all members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can

themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them. And such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighbourhood of which it forms part" (Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 71). 8. I thank all of you, beloved Brothers, for your dedication as pastors to the flock that has been entrusted to your care. I recall at this time the *heroic sacrifices of many devoted missionaries* who over the past century have preached the Gospel in Nigeria and sustained the faithful in giving an ever more authentic witness to the teaching of Christ and his Church. Their exemplary lives have inspired many Nigerian young people to offer themselves to Christ in the priesthood and in the religious life. In your daily labours at the service of the Gospel, I wish to commend each of you to the intercession of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, asking her to assist you. And in the love of Jesus her Son, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to your clergy, Religious and faithful.

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