



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF MALAWI ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Tuesday 23 August, 1988

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. I am pleased to welcome you, the members of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, on this joyous occasion of your *ad Limina* visit. We are gathered here in the fellowship of the Holy spirit and in the grace and peace of Christ, who remains for ever the chief cornerstone of the Church (Cfr. *Eph.* 2, 20). Our assembly, while witnessing to the communion which we share in the Church, also serves to strengthen ever more our bonds of unity and charity in the College of Bishops (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 22).

Your presence here bears eloquent testimony to the truth that Christ chose to build his Church on Peter (Cfr. *Matth.* 16, 19), that he commissioned him to confirm his brothers in the faith (Cfr. *Luc.* 22, 32), and to shepherd them in perfect unity (Cfr. *Io.* 21, 15-17). Our coming together today enables us *to renew once again Peter's profession of faith* in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (Cfr. *Matth.* 16, 16).

2. Each of you represents your own local Church and thus I wish to offer through you my heartfelt greetings and the assurance of my spiritual closeness to all the People of God in Malawi. As the pastors of these Churches you bring with you the hopes and joys, the trials and sufferings of your people. You bring with you their strong and enthusiastic faith, which was first preached there a century ago and has taken root in their hearts and continues to spread. Together with this faith of your people I know that you bring their profound respect for the mystery of Peter's role in God's plan for the universal Church. It is with deep affection that I wish to strengthen them all, and you their Bishops, in faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. It is my fervent hope *to confirm you in your mission as pastors of the flock* and thus to give a new impetus to evangelization in Malawi.

I am filled with a deep and abiding hope for the future of the Church in your country. I take this opportunity to praise the many courageous initiatives that you continue to undertake for the proclamation of the Gospel in your society. Together with the missionaries, and with your local clergy, religious and lay catechists, you have dedicated yourselves to *the Church's mission of evangelization*, "the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity" (PAULI VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). By announcing Jesus Christ and his Gospel to the many who have not yet heard or accepted them, you have been, in the words of Simeon, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (*Luc.* 2, 32). You have been faithful to the command of Christ (Cfr. *Matth.* 28, 19-20) and carried on the fundamental programme of the Church begun on Pentecost.

As you are well aware, the Church's great task of evangelization consists first of all in allowing the Gospel to permeate our own lives so that we in turn may bring it to others. Thus it is important to recall that evangelization involves *conversion*, that is, interior change.

The *process of purification* inherent in evangelization means the acceptance of Christ's call to "repent, and believe in the Gospel" (*Marc.* 1, 15). As a consequence of this conversion unto salvation not only the individual but the entire ecclesial community is changed, becoming ever more an expression of living faith and charity.

3. It is your particular responsibility, my Brothers, to adopt the *most appropriate means for proclaiming the message of salvation* in your society. The Church does not hesitate to show her respect and *esteem for non-Christian religions*, for "they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people" (PAULI VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53). Since all those who acknowledge the Creator are in some way included in the plan of salvation there exists between Christians and non-Christians a profound basis for mutual love and understanding and peaceful coexistence. The Church maintains that her commitment to dialogue with non-Christians does not preclude her essential mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ. As Catholics we are called even in difficult situations to proclaim the Gospel by the witness of our lives. And I hasten to add that Christian witness through personal example also needs to be accompanied by speaking of God, who is the foundation of our faith, the reason of our hope, and the source of our love (Cfr. IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Allocutio iis qui plenario coetui Secretariatus pro non christianis interfuerunt*, die 28 apr. 1987: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, X, 1 (1987) 1449 ss).

I am pleased to have learned of the various *ecumenical contacts* between the Christian Communion in Malawi. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, there are many ways in which the Church is linked to those who have been baptised and bear the name of Christian (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 15). These common bonds which unite Christians need to be more fully appreciated. *Common prayer* and collaboration in *social action* should always characterize our relations with other Christians, as well as discussion on the theological level by those qualified to present the Church's teaching in matters of faith and morals.

4. My dear Brothers: as we reflect together on the activity of the Church in Malawi I wish to acknowledge in particular the vital contribution that your priests are making to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the social progress of your people. I wish to express *my fraternal love for all the priests* who collaborate with you in shepherding the flock of Christ entrusted to your care.

The ministry to the People of God which our brother priests share with us not only requires their loyalty to us, but also calls for us, who are aware of their achievements and their difficulties, to be true brothers to them, showing them compassion and understanding at all times. Each brother priest is meant to be with us, in the words of Saint Paul, “a servant of Christ... set apart... to proclaim the Gospel of God” (*Rom. 1,1*).

An essential aspect of our apostolic charge is to confirm our brother priests in *their identity and commitment*. It is the ministry of both the Word and the Eucharist which clearly define the priest's role. Thus we read in the Acts of the Apostles that the apostolic priorities are “to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word” (*Act. 6, 4*). Let us never fail to remind our brother priests that in the Eucharist, which is itself “the source and summit of the whole work of evangelization” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2), they find the source of their pastoral charity (Cfr. *ibid.* 14). Moreover it is in the Eucharist and in the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance that they will find the strength to make the daily offering of their lives as well as the grace needed to remain faithful to their promise of celibacy.

5. Truly a great blessing for the Church in Malawi is that the number of *candidates for the priesthood* continues to increase and thus offers much encouragement for the years ahead. Nevertheless, it is the careful attention which you yourselves give to each of your seminarians and to the programmes of priestly formation in your local minor seminaries and two major seminaries which will ensure the spiritual, academic and pastoral training of your future priests. An essential requisite for a solid programme is the presence of well-qualified priests to serve as spiritual directors and professors on the theological and philosophical faculties of your seminaries. Every effort must be made in order to provide suitable priests for this important task of preparing seminarians even if you need to rely on assistance from outside of your local Churches. I wish to offer each of you my prayer full support in this vital task of priestly formation.

Of great importance for the evangelization of your people over the past century has been the invaluable contribution made by *the missionary priests, Sister and Brothers*. With great dedication and holiness they have planted the seeds of the faith in the hearts of your people. May their example always be an inspiration to those who labour in the service of the Gospel and seek to further the growth of the Kingdom of God in Malawi.

I note that like the candidates for the diocesan priesthood there has also been a steady growth in the number of vocations to the religious life. The contribution which the members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life are making to the whole work of evangelization in your country is seen

especially in the spheres of health care and teaching.

In your work with religious I encourage you to renew your efforts to manifest the great esteem and appreciation which the Church has for them in their *vocation of consecrated love*, urging them always to reflect ever more their specific charism in appropriate forms of apostolic work. As you well know, the very presence of religious in the life of the ecclesial community offers to the world a leaven of authentic Christian living. Their fidelity in following the Lord Jesus in a spirit of joy and self-sacrifice is a particularly effective means of proclaiming the Gospel.

6. It is with much satisfaction that I have learned of the ever increasing role that the laity of your country are assuming in the Church's activities. Among the many movements which are animating the lay people there are the Legion of Mary, Catholic Women's Organization, Franciscan Third Order, Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers and the Family Apostolate. Each of these lay organization is making a significant contribution to evangelization in Malawi. I am pleased that the laity are a true force in providing a number of pastoral workers for the Church's life and mission. I refer to the presence of lay people as catechists, leaders of communities, teachers and those responsible for small communities.

The specific field for lay people in spreading the Gospel includes their daily *work*. In the case of the married, their role as parents entrusts them with the primary responsibility for the Christian education of their children (Cfr. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3). I wish to encourage you in all your initiatives to support the religious education of your country's youth. In order to grow to maturity in Christ, they need a *systematic presentation of the whole of Christian teaching*. In every age the teaching of the truths of the faith remains a fundamental task of the Church. We must ensure that our young people receive an adequate formation in all that Jesus commanded to be taught (Cfr. *Matth.* 28, 20), the whole doctrinal and moral content of the Gospel.

7. The large number of your faithful who participate in the celebration of the Sunday liturgy and make frequent use of the sacraments is to be greatly commended. I join you, however, in your pastoral concern for the practice of polygamy, the irregular marriages, and the growth in the number of divorces. Other serious problems affecting the family and society include the practice of artificial contraception and recourse to abortion. Against the background of every breakdown of family life the Church must continue to proclaim as effectively as possible the *meaning and value of Christian love and the dignity of Christian life*. We must do everything to help our people understand the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that marriage is "mutual gift of two persons", and that "this intimate union... as well as the good of children, imposes total fidelity on the spouses and requires an unbreakable oneness between them" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48). With this in mind the Church must continue to devote herself to the special mission of protecting the sacredness and dignity of marriage, for she knows that the love of husband and wife is a sharing in the mystery of the life and love of God himself.

8. Finally, I cannot fail to mention the large number of *refugees* who have come to your country in recent years seeking safety, food and shelter. I have been told that they have come principally from Mozambique and that their number continues to increase. I encourage you in all your endeavours to alleviate their sufferings and to help provide for their physical and spiritual well-being. Since many of these people are Catholic, your local Churches should be assisted in so far as possible by priests and religious from other communities in your efforts to respond to their spiritual needs. It is my fervent prayer that the international community will continue to provide aid in the difficult problem of refugees in your region.

My dear Brothers: as you pursue your pastoral labours be assured that I am with you in the love of Jesus Christ. Together we have a single purpose: to prove faithful to the pastoral trust committed to us by the Lord namely, to lead the People of God in the way of salvation. May Mary who is “a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim People of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, 68), intercede for you and all the beloved people of Malawi. The peace of Christ be with you always. With my Apostolic Blessing.

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