



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO NIGERIA (MARCH 21-23, 1997)

MEETING WITH MUSLIM LEADERS

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 22 March 1998

Your Royal Highness the Sultan of Sokoto,

Your Royal Highnesses the Emirs,

*Distinguished Muslim Leaders,*1. Although my stay in Nigeria is rather brief, I did not want it to go by without such an important meeting with the highest representatives of Islam in this country. Allow me to express my gratitude to you for having accepted the invitation to come here this evening; I deeply appreciate this opportunity of greeting through you the entire Muslim community in Nigeria. I thank His Royal Highness for his kind words, and in turn I salute you with a greeting of Peace, the peace which has its true source in God, among whose "Beautiful Names", according to your tradition, is al-Salam, Peace. As you are aware, the reason for my visit has been to proclaim solemnly the holiness of a son of this country, Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi. He has been declared a model of a religious man who loved others and sacrificed himself for them. The example of people who live holy lives teaches us not only to practise mutual respect and understanding, but to be ourselves models of goodness, reconciliation and collaboration, across ethnic and religious boundaries, for the good of the whole country and for the greater glory of God.2. As Christians and Muslims, we share belief in "the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day" (*Lumen Gentium*, 16). Though we differ in the way we understand this One God, we are nevertheless akin in our efforts to know and follow his will. That religious aspiration itself constitutes a spiritual bond between Christians and Muslims, a bond which can provide a firm and broad-ranging basis for cooperation in many fields. This is important wherever Christians and Muslims live together. It is particularly important in Nigeria, where Christians and Muslims are present in such large numbers. Among the important convictions which we share, both Christianity and Islam stress the dignity of every human person as having been created by God for a special purpose. This leads us to uphold the value of human life at all its stages, and to give support to the family as the essential unit of society. As a result we see as a sin against the Creator every abuse against the weaker members of

society, and against women and children in particular. Moreover, our religions lay emphasis on the responsibility of individuals to respond to what, in conscience, they see that God wants of them. It is a disquieting reflection on the state of human rights today that in some parts of the world people are still persecuted and imprisoned for reasons of conscience and for their religious beliefs. As innocent victims, they are sad proof that force — and not democratic principles — has prevailed, that the intention is not to serve the truth and the common good but to defend particular interests at any cost. On the contrary, both our traditions teach an ethic which rejects an individualism that seeks its own satisfaction without paying attention to the needs of others. We believe that in God's eyes the earth's resources are destined for all and not just for a few. We are conscious that the exercise of power and authority is meant to be a service to the community, and that all forms of corruption and violence are a serious offence against God's wishes for the human family. We have in common so much teaching regarding goodness, truth and virtue that a great understanding between us is possible. And indeed necessary. In the [Message that I addressed to the Muslim Community in Kaduna during my first visit to your country in 1982](#), I said: "I am convinced that if we (Christians and Muslims) join hands in the name of God we can accomplish much good . . . We can collaborate in the promotion of justice, peace and development. It is my earnest hope that our solidarity of brotherhood, under God, will truly enhance the future of Nigeria and all Africa" (14 February 1982, No. 4).³ In any society, disagreements can arise. Sometimes the disputes and conflicts which ensue take on a religious character. Religion itself is sometimes used unscrupulously to cause conflict. Nigeria has known such conflicts, though it must be recognized with gratitude that in many parts of the country people of different religious traditions live side by side as good and peaceful neighbours. Ethnic and cultural differences should never be seen as justifying conflict. Rather, like the various voices in a choir, these differences can exist in harmony, provided there is a real desire to respect one another. Christians and Muslims agree that in religious matters there can be no coercion. We are committed to teaching attitudes of openness and respect towards the followers of other religions. But religion can be misused, and it is surely the duty of religious leaders to guard against this. Above all, whenever violence is done in the name of religion, we must make it clear to everyone that in such instances we are not dealing with true religion. For the Almighty cannot tolerate the destruction of his own image in his children. From this place in the heart of West Africa I appeal to all Muslims, just as I have appealed to my Brother Bishops and all Catholics: let friendship and cooperation be our inspiration! Let us work together for a new era of solidarity and joint service in facing the enormous challenge of building a better, more just and more humane world! When problems arise, whether at the local, regional or national levels, solutions must be sought through dialogue. Is not this the way of African tradition? When Nigerians of different backgrounds come together to pray for the needs of the country — each group according to its own tradition — they know that they stand together as a united people. In this way they truly give honour to the Most High Lord of heaven and earth. *The Holy Father added extemporaneously:* Cardinal Arinze of Nigeria: he is a Roman Catholic Cardinal; he is a Nigerian Cardinal. And if he is promoting the dialogue with Muslims in the whole world, he is doing that having the experience of dialogue with the Muslims in Nigeria. So I see a great contribution by your country, by your community to the universal activity and dialogue in the Church in the whole world of today. I thank you very much for this meeting