



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
OF ZIMBABWE ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

4 September 1998

Dear Brother Bishops, 1. With gladness I welcome you, the Bishops of Zimbabwe, on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:2). As successors of the Apostles, we have a "partnership in the Gospel" (Phil 1:5) which extends, in appropriate ways, to the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses. I ask you to take my greetings back to them and to assure them that they are remembered constantly in my prayers. The passage of time has not dimmed the memory of my visit to your country when I personally experienced the warmth of your people's hospitality and the wealth of their cultural traditions. There is cause for rejoicing in the fact that the Catholic population of Zimbabwe is steadily increasing: "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes" (Ps 118:23). You report that many adults embrace the faith and are being brought into the Church. Thus we can immediately identify two important priorities of your ministry as Bishops: the pastoral care of families and the religious formation of the laity. 2. Certainly, in your country as elsewhere in Africa and throughout the world, the family as an institution is enduring difficult trials. The divorce rate is high; the scourge of abortion continues to dehumanize society; the AIDS crisis remains critical, leaving no segment of the population immune from its devastating effects. Moreover, this situation is often exacerbated by policies which do not lead to the changes in attitudes and behaviour necessary if these ills are to be successfully overcome. Thus your words about the sacredness of all human life, about the moral law regarding human sexuality, about the holiness of married life, are all the more urgent. As Bishops, we need to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or self-deception (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 58). You are rightly concerned at the number of Catholic couples who marry according to traditional customs without the benefit of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, and at the high incidence of irregular marriage situations and the continuing practice of polygamy. A correct and complete catechesis regarding Christian marriage in well presented parish programmes of marriage preparation can help young couples to grow spiritually and to persevere in a full sharing in the Church's sacramental life. Through a concerted effort inspired by the Marriage and Family Commission of your Bishops' Conference, priests and other pastoral workers can be more and more aware that the future of the Church and of society as a whole depends on the stability of marriage and the family. On the subject of lay formation in general, we must acknowledge once more with gratitude the invaluable contribution made to the building up of the Church in Zimbabwe by your catechists: they are truly a priceless treasure, for

it is they who teach the faith to young people and prepare adult converts to receive Baptism and to be fully initiated into ecclesial life. As the Fathers at the African Synod observed: “The role of the catechist has been and remains a determinative force in the implantation and expansion of the Church in Africa. The Synod recommends that catechists not only receive a sound initial formation . . . but that they continue to receive doctrinal formation as well as moral and spiritual support” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 91). And it is truly a blessing that every one of your Dioceses is equipped with a pastoral training centre for catechists. I have read with interest about your “Winter Schools” for catechists, and I encourage you to expand such training sessions and increase their depth, looking to the continuing intellectual pastoral and spiritual formation of your catechists as one of the great commitments of your ministry. In all of this, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* can be an invaluable tool and resource.³ Young people comprise over fifty per cent of your country’s population, and their pastoral care is of vital concern to you. Some of the major difficulties facing Zimbabwe’s youth — including unemployment, the harmful effects of a certain use of the media, and the allure of religious sects — make it imperative for you to address these questions with determination and pastoral inventiveness. I encourage you to do all that you can to increase the effectiveness of Catholic youth organizations. Through appropriate training and activities, young people “discover very early on the value of the gift of self, an essential means for the person to reach maturity” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 93). In this way they mature humanly and spiritually, and become responsible members of the community and effective evangelizers of their peers. Prayer, study and reflection are all important elements which cannot be missing in the formation of young people. For this they need the leadership of priests, religious and lay leaders who genuinely bear witness in their lives to Christ and the Gospel. Here too your Bishops’ Conference can make a significant contribution by taking steps to ensure that its National Catholic Youth Council is properly equipped and ready to lend effective assistance in the pastoral care of young people. In Zimbabwe, moreover, Catholic schools play an important part in passing on the truths and values of the Christian faith, and the instruction and training imparted by Catholic educational institutions are much valued by the general public. Still, certain policies prohibiting the teaching of religious faith during regular school hours make this task difficult. It is necessary to continue to defend the principles involved: the right of religious freedom and the prior rights of parents in their children’s education. Your country’s political leaders themselves have lauded the advantages of Christian education and commented on how the Church can contribute to the necessary renewal of moral values in society. I encourage your efforts to come to a formal understanding with the Government concerning the rights and just autonomy of Catholic schools.⁴ In all these undertakings your primary and chief collaborators in preaching the Gospel and spreading the Good News of salvation are your priests. For them in particular, as Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote, the Bishop must be “the living image of God the Father” (*Ad. Trall.*, 3:1). This spiritual fatherhood finds expression in a deep bond of communion between yourselves and your priests, in your being accessible to them and giving them the support which they expect and need from you. As you seek to show genuine spiritual leadership, your attitude of openness, compassion and cooperation towards them, your personal love for the Church, your own priestly spirituality, the example of your liturgical and personal prayer, and your attachment to the See of Peter, all play an important part in creating a positive and truly serene spirit of unity within the presbyterate. The human and spiritual well-being of your priests will be the crown of your Episcopal ministry. The increasing numbers of priestly and religious vocations in many of your Dioceses is a great blessing but also a great responsibility. I can only encourage you to select with care the candidates whom you ordain to the priesthood, to watch over the doctrinal soundness of the programme of studies, and to ensure the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation of your seminarians. The *Charter on Priestly Formation* recently published by your Conference should prove to be a most useful instrument in this regard and can also serve as a precious guide to Religious Superiors as you invite them to exercise the same vigilance and care over the members of their Institutes. With the advancement of a secularistic

and materialistic view of life, it is all the more necessary for priests and religious to be clearly seen to follow Christ's example of self-giving love, which means exercising discipline, mortification, self-sacrifice and generosity towards others. It is of paramount importance that future priests understand clearly and realistically the value of celibate chastity and its relation to priestly ministry. Thus they will learn to "appreciate, love and live celibacy according to its true nature and according to its real purpose, that is for evangelical, spiritual and pastoral motives" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 50). Shared simplicity of life brings joy to the presbyterate and, when accompanied by mutual trust, facilitates the willing obedience which every priest owes his Bishop. Eloquent testimony is borne to the Gospel and the unity of the local Church is strengthened when episcopal authority is exercised as selfless service and when priestly obedience is practised as ready cooperation.⁵ The commitment and generosity shown by members of Religious Institutes is an essential part of the history of the Church in Zimbabwe. Their way of life, their loving service, especially in the fields of education and healthcare, has been a sign of the power of God's own love at work among his people, generation after generation, as he brings forth from the labours of his zealous servants an ever more abundant harvest (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). As you invite religious to continue to be faithful witnesses to the Lord in the midst of his people, it is important that the particularly invaluable apostolate of women religious be increasingly esteemed as a vital part of the mission of building up the "household of God" (Eph 2:19) in Zimbabwe.⁶ Dear Brother Bishops, each day you endeavour to be faithful to the duties which the Lord has laid upon you. Both individually in your respective Dioceses and jointly through the Bishops' Conference you seek to shed the light of sound moral principles on the contemporary realities of Zimbabwean society. In the particularly delicate area of the redistribution of land, for example, you have made yourselves spokesmen of the Church's social teaching in expounding the need for "a suitable mechanism . . . to ensure that justice, equity and fairness are preserved at all times". You have noted that "the common good requires that the redistribution of land be undertaken in such a way that the ability . . . to feed Zimbabwe, and indeed neighbouring countries, is not affected"; nor have you neglected environmental concerns, pointing out that "ecological preservation of the land must also be a priority" (*Statement of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference on Land Reform*). The Holy See is acutely aware of the importance of this complex issue for the just development of countries and for peace among peoples (cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Towards a Better Distribution of Land: the Challenge of Agrarian Reform*, 23 November 1997). During these past weeks we have all been sad witnesses of the spread of violence and armed conflict in various parts of Africa, and particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It must be our hope and prayer that there will be a prompt end to violence in the region, especially the violence that is aimed at innocent civilians who are exposed to terrifying repression and plundering, deprived of their livelihood and condemned to an uncertain future. Yours is a peaceful nation. You must work to keep it so by reminding your people that a military solution to profound social and economic problems will always be an illusion and will be the cause of further grievances and injustices. As servants of the Prince of Peace we must loudly proclaim that the solution to a nation's problems lies not in the destructive force of hatred and death, but in constructive dialogue and negotiation. In these areas, as in all aspects of your pastoral ministry, the experience of working together in the Episcopal Conference is very positive and beneficial, and I know that you are grateful to the dedicated priests, religious and lay staff members of the various Conference offices. Likewise, the development of efficient diocesan structures in accordance with Canon Law is also helping to make your service to the People of God ever more effective. I encourage you to continue along this path.⁷ These are some of the reflections which your visit prompts, and it is with love and understanding that I share them with you. In this way I am able to participate in the joys and challenges which are yours as you shepherd God's flock. On the threshold of the Third Christian Millennium — and always — the Lord is calling the Church in Zimbabwe to bear credible witness to the Gospel through Christlike deeds. Be assured of my constant prayers for your local Churches, that all the faithful will respond with

steadfast faith and unbounded generosity to the grace which the Lord is pouring out upon you. Take my encouragement and best wishes to the priests and Religious, to the seminarians and catechists, to the catechumens and all who seek the truth of Christ, to the families and parish communities. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen" (1 Cor 16:23- 24).

Copyright 1998 © Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana