



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO BISHOPS OF MADAGASCAR**

Saturday, 26 September 1998

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I joyfully welcome you on your *ad limina* visit. You who have received from Christ the responsibility of guiding the People of God in Madagascar have come to make your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles; on this occasion you have fruitful exchanges with the Successor of Peter and his collaborators, which enable you to strengthen the communion between the Church in your country and the Apostolic See. Thus, I hope that on your return to the people entrusted to you, your pastoral zeal and the missionary dynamism of your communities will be further strengthened so that the Gospel may be proclaimed to all.

In his kind words, the President of your Episcopal Conference, Cardinal Armand Gaétan Razafindratandra, Archbishop of Antananarivo, has given us an accurate overview of the Church's life on the Great Island and of the circumstances in which she carries out her mission. I warmly thank him.

On this happy occasion, I affectionately greet the priests, religious, catechists and all the faithful of your diocesan communities. Please also convey my cordial greetings to the Malagasy people, whose qualities of hospitality, solidarity and courage in facing the many problems of daily life are known to me.

2. Following in the Apostles' footsteps, the Bishops have received the mission boldly to proclaim the mystery of salvation in its entirety. "Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching" (2 Tm 4:2). This difficult task requires each Bishop to draw his energy from the grace of Christ received in abundance through the gift of the Spirit on the day of Episcopal ordination and constantly renewed in prayer. The Church needs pastors to organize and administer with care the various diocesan institutions, and to guide the People of God. To carry out this service they should be inspired by human and, more especially, by spiritual considerations, as well as by a wish to live a holy life so as to conform themselves totally to Christ who sends them. To

love Christ and live in intimacy with him also means loving the Church and, like the Lord Jesus, giving oneself to her in order to bear witness to God's infinite love for mankind.

The Second Vatican Council highlighted the need for Bishops to co-operate more and more closely, to fulfil their office fruitfully (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 37). I therefore warmly encourage you to continue to deepen the bonds of collegial union and collaboration with each other, especially within your Episcopal Conference, in living communion with the See of Peter.

A few weeks ago, the pastoral solidarity of the Dioceses of your country was particularly evident at the celebration of a National Synod on the theme: *The Church, Family of God Gathered by the Eucharist*, which you organized as a continuation of the recent Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. I hope that this important event in the life of the Church in Madagascar, which is part of the preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, will be an opportunity for each of your communities to strengthen their faith in Jesus Christ, and will awaken in the faithful "a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbour, especially the most needy" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 42).

3. Turning now to your diocesan priests who are your principal co-workers in the apostolic ministry, I would like to assure them of the Church's gratitude for the generosity they show in their priesthood at the service of God's People. I invite them to persevere with joy and enthusiasm in their vocation, while leading a life worthy of the greatness of the gift given to them. "The priest, by virtue of the consecration which he receives in the sacrament of Orders, is sent forth by the Father through the mediatorship of Jesus Christ, to whom he is configured in a special way as head and shepherd of his people, in order to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit in service of the Church and for the salvation of the world" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 12). Docile to the action of the Spirit, may they always keep their eyes fixed on Christ's face, to advance courageously on the paths of holiness, without being influenced by the ways of the world. They are called to unify their spiritual life, their ministry and their daily activities, by regularly celebrating the *Liturgy of the Hours* and the sacraments, and by meditating on God's Word. Faithful to celibacy, accepted in a free and loving decision and lived with constantly renewed courage, they will recognize it "as a priceless gift from God, as 'an incentive to pastoral charity', as a singular sharing in God's fatherhood and in the fruitfulness of the Church, and as a witness to the world of the eschatological kingdom" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 29). When your priests encounter difficulties, be attentive, available Pastors who, by word and example, restore their hope and help them set out once again! I warmly encourage you to support them so that they will live in fidelity to their priestly commitments, while providing the spiritual and material conditions that enable them to meet the just demands of the ministry.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, be close to each of your priests; maintain relations with them that are based on trust and dialogue; may they truly be your sons and friends! Be responsible first of all for their sanctification and continuing formation; may you offer them ways to continue developing throughout their lives the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of their priestly formation, so that their being and acting may conform ever more closely to Christ the Good Shepherd.

Lastly, I hope that in the presbyterate, the diocesan and religious priests will accept one another fraternally, with the legitimate diversity of their charisms and choices. In common prayer and sharing, they will find support and

encouragement for their ministry and their personal life.

4. Among your constant concerns are the birth and growth of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The many young people who respond to Christ's call and willingly follow him are a sign of the dynamism of your local Churches and an encouragement for the future. However, great prudence and careful discernment are essential to strengthening their vocation and to enabling each one to make a free and conscious response to Christ's call. A life of following the Lord is demanding and thus the choice of candidates requires that they be well-balanced and have human, spiritual, emotional, psychological and intellectual abilities as well as a firm will. I would like here to reaffirm the request made by the Fathers of the African Synod "that religious institutes that do not have houses in Africa' do not feel authorized 'to come seeking new vocations without prior dialogue with the local Ordinary'" (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 94). Indeed, young people who are uprooted will have great difficulty in developing the call they have received and will be tempted by the many attractions of a society unfamiliar to them. The hope of seeing new African missionary vocations grow and develop, in order to proclaim the Gospel throughout the continent and even beyond it, also depends on wise discernment.

It is incumbent on you who are Christ's first representatives in priestly formation (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 65) to carefully watch over the quality of life and formation in the seminaries. I invite you to set up joint educational communities, which give seminarians a concrete example of an irreproachable Christian and priestly life. How can young people prepare themselves properly for the priesthood if they do not see the example of authentic teachers and witnesses? I know how difficult it is for you to choose priests who are experienced in the spiritual life, qualified in theology and philosophy, and capable of directing young people. I earnestly hope that you will be able to train competent formation personnel for this mission, even if sacrifices must be made in other areas of pastoral life. This is one of the most important ministries today for the life of the Church, especially in your country.

I offer special encouragement to those who are responsible for preparing young people to consecrate themselves totally in the priesthood or the religious life. May those who have been strengthened in their search for God show the beauty of their vocation to those whom the Lord is inviting to follow him, and help them discern God's plans for their life! May their encounter with Christ make them as radiant as the disciples after the Transfiguration!

May your seminarians have an ever more vivid awareness of the greatness and dignity of the call they have received! During their period of formation, they need to acquire sufficient emotional maturity and to be deeply convinced that celibacy and chastity are inseparable for the priest. Teaching the meaning and the place of consecration to Christ in the priesthood must be at the centre of their formation so that they can freely and generously commit their whole selves to following Christ and sharing in his mission.

5. Institutes of consecrated life make an important and valued contribution to many areas of the Church's life in your country. The commitment of consecrated people to the work of evangelization must show in a particular way that "the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 76). May the members of religious communities fully live their offering to Christ by bearing witness to him throughout their lives, putting the riches of their own charism at the service of the Church! By letting themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, may they walk resolutely on the paths of holiness and may they show in everyone's sight their joy at having given themselves totally to God for the service of their brothers and sisters!

To consecrated persons I express the Church's gratitude and hope for the apostolate they carry out, as a consequence of their love for Christ and the gift of themselves, by serving the sick, the most wounded and the very poor in society. By their presence in the world of education, they help young people to grow in humanity, while acquiring a human, cultural and religious formation that prepares them to take their place in the Church and in society.

To enable the institutes of consecrated life to express their own charisms in ever greater communion with the diocesan Churches, as I stressed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, I invite "the leaders of the local Churches and of the institutes of consecrated life and the societies of apostolic life to foster dialogue among themselves, in order to create, in the spirit of the Church as Family, mixed groups for consultation which would serve as a witness to fraternity and as a sign of unity in the service of a common mission" (n. 94).

6. By virtue of their Baptism, all the faithful are called to participate fully in the Church's mission. I rejoice in the exemplary contribution made by many lay people to the ecclesial life of your country. I acknowledge in particular the work of the catechists who, in often difficult conditions, strive to proclaim the Gospel to their brothers and sisters and, in communion with their Bishops and priests, to provide leadership for their communities and to care for them. Their role is of the utmost importance for the Church's establishment and vitality. They also show their children what it means to serve Christ. I invite them to maintain a lively awareness of being "members of the Church of Jesus Christ, participants in her mystery of communion and in her dynamism in mission and the apostolate" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 64).

I also hope that lay people acquire a sound formation in order to take up their Christian responsibilities in social life. In fact, it is their task to work with selflessness and tenacity in building the earthly city, with respect for the dignity of the human person and in search of the common good. As for the injustices that destroy peace between individuals and groups, and everything that perverts the mind, may they foster ever greater solidarity, the true *fiHAVANANA*, which seeks to open human beings to the divine plan of salvation!

Special care must be given to the family, that first and vital cell of society. The formation of consciences, especially to remind people of respect for all human life and to teach children basic values, is an essential task for the Church and her Pastors. As for the difficulties encountered by so many young couples, I encourage you to continue your efforts to help them better understand the genuine nature of human love, conjugal chastity and Christian marriage based on fidelity and indissolubility.

To the young people of Madagascar, I would also like to make a vigorous appeal for trust and hope. I know of their great anxieties, but I also know the riches that God has given them to face the future with courage and clear-sightedness. May they be able to assume their responsibilities in the life of the Church and of society with a vivid awareness of their vocation as human beings and Christians, which commits them to being sowers of peace and love! Christ awaits them and shows them the path of life.

7. Bearing witness to Christ's love for the sick and the poor is one of the characteristics of Christian life. Through her social institutions, the Church works for the integral development of the person and of society. I am grateful to all, who, through their humble service in imitation of Christ, show the Church's love for those who are suffering or in distress. Poverty cannot be accepted as inevitable. It is necessary to help the poor grow in humanity and to ensure that their

dignity as children of God is recognized. Despite the difficulties, your land is rich in promise. I therefore strongly encourage you to develop initiatives of solidarity and service for people who are often in distressing social and economic situations, notably by giving a proper place to works of education and human development, which will enable each individual to express the gifts God has given him by creating him in his image. Indeed, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, “a people’s development does not derive primarily from money, material assistance or technological means, but from the formation of consciences and the gradual maturing of ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour. Man is the principal agent of development, not money or technology” (n. 58).

The fraternal relations that exist between the different Christian denominations in Madagascar are evidence of your commitment to respond generously and perceptively to the Lord’s prayer: “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). These ties take concrete form in the efforts of the Council of Christian Churches of Madagascar, which has frequently acted to promote justice and integral human development in national life. It is very important to continue the quest for Christian unity in a collaboration inspired by the Gospel, which would be a true common witness to Christ and a way of proclaiming the Good News to everyone. On the long path that leads to total communion between brethren, you must turn together to Christ. Prayer should thus have a privileged role in obtaining from the Lord conversion of heart and the unity of Christ’s disciples. To respond better to the requirements of honest collaboration, it is indispensable that the faithful be prepared to meet their brothers and sisters in a spirit of truth, without hiding the differences that still separate us from full communion (cf. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, 1993). On the other hand, it is desirable that couples who live in a mixed marriage be supported by pastoral care adapted to their needs, in a spirit of ecumenical openness. Despite the difficulties that can arise, they will be authentic artisans of unity through the quality of the love shown to their spouse and children.

9. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, as we near the end of this fraternal meeting, I would like to encourage you to proceed with confidence. In this year dedicated to the Holy Spirit and to his sanctifying presence in the community of Christ’s disciples, I invite the Catholics of Madagascar to deepen the signs of hope present in their life and in that of the world. May they renew “their hope in the definitive coming of the kingdom of God, preparing for it daily in their hearts, in the Christian community to which they belong, in their particular social context, and in world history itself” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 46)! I entrust you, the members of your Dioceses and all the Malagasy people to the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary and of Bl. Victoire Rasoamanarivo, an admirable witness to the spiritual quality of the laity in your country, as I cordially grant my Apostolic Blessing to everyone.

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